The New Criterion

February 2005

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

Notes & Comments, 1
The power of journalism *by Kenneth Minogue*, 4
Philip Larkin's "element" *by Dan Jacobson*, 14
Desert-island reading *by Theodore Dalrymple*, 21
Alfred Duggan's past *by John Derbyshire*, 28
New poems *by Elizabeth Spires, Samuel Menashe & Ben Downing*, 34

Theater *by Mark Steyn*, 38; **Art** *by James Panero & Roger Kimball*, 43; **Music** *by Jay Nordlinger*, 47; **The media** *by James Bowman*, 52
Books: *Joachim Köhler* Richard Wagner *reviewed by Roger Scruton*, 57; *John Sutherland* Stephen Spender *& Stephen Spender* New collected poems, edited by Michael Brett *reviewed by Paul Dean*, 61; *Mark Stevens & Annalyn Swan* De Kooning *reviewed by Karen Wilkin*, 64; *David Lodge* Author, author *& Colm Tóibín* The master *reviewed by Carl Rollyson*, 67; *Leonie Frieda* Catherine de Medici *reviewed by Brooke Allen*, 71; **Shorter notices**, 75;
Notebook: The Metropolitan Duccio *by Marco Grassi*, 77

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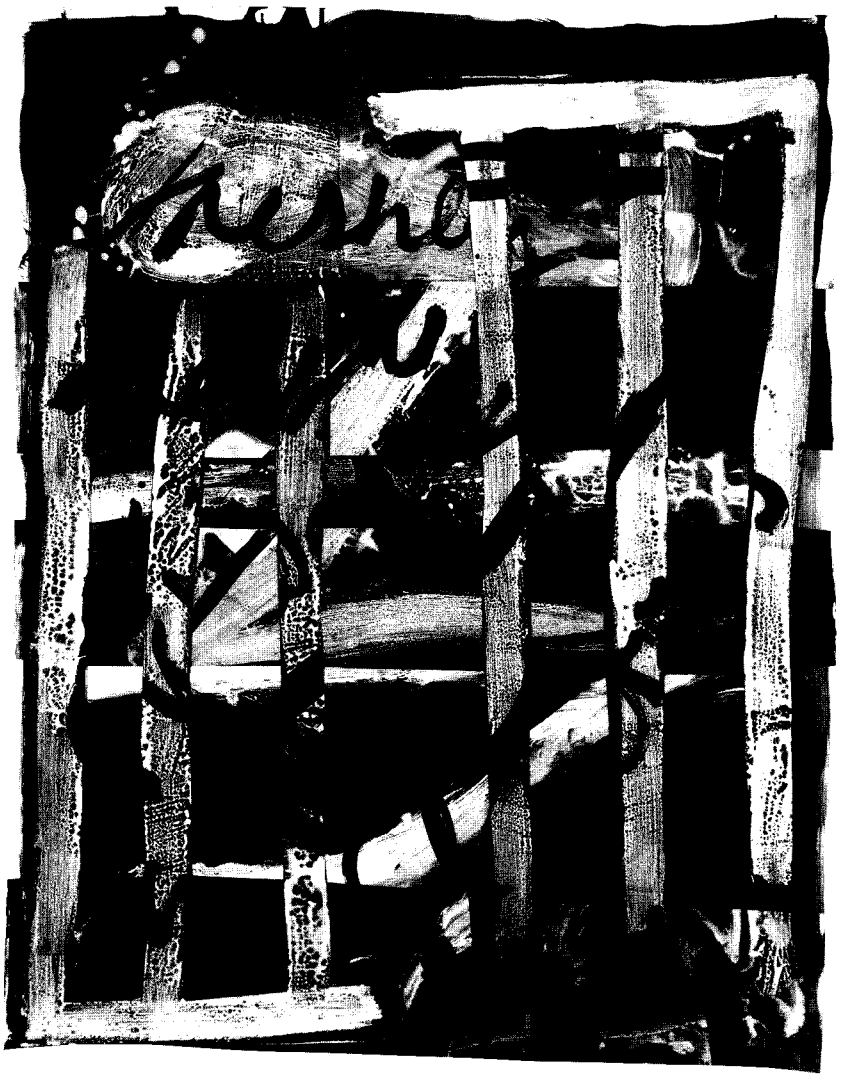

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Notes & Comments: February 2005

Guy Davenport, 1927–2005

It is with great sadness that we note the passing of Guy Davenport, poet, novelist, book illustrator, essayist nonpareil, raconteur indefatigable, master of humane inquiry. Guy was entirely sui generis, an autodidact of the old school who managed to sample Duke, Merton College at Oxford, and Harvard University (Ph.D. on Ezra Pound) with no visible deformation. He taught for decades: at the University of Washington in St. Louis, at Haverford College, and at the University of Kentucky from 1963 until 1991 when a MacArthur "genius" award (for once they got it right) set him free, free at last. Yet if Guy was in, he most certainly was not of, the academy. A less academic personality is difficult to imagine. Indeed, although Guy was a gentle, accommodating soul, someone whose unextinguishable curiosity generally left him amused rather than indignant at the spectacle of human foibles, he made an exception for the arid, the pedantic, the politically correct, in short, for the academic—the one term, so far as we can recall, that was for him invariably a term of diminishment, a term of contempt.

At first blush, Guy's anti-academic animus might seem odd, for few people were more learned in so many fields than Guy Davenport. Part classicist, part visual artist, entirely a man of letters, Guy was as at home in the niceties of botanical taxonomy as he was in the world of the *Greek Anthology*. He had rummaged around expertly in the arcana of Pound's *Cantos*, had followed Darwin to the Galapagos Islands, and what he didn't know about Kafka or Proust or Henry James wasn't worth knowing. He had a keen eye for etymology, not just in the dictionary sense of word derivations, but in what we might call (though Guy would never have called) the metaphysical sense: he knew that the etymology of "etymology" was the science or *logos* of the true (*etumos*) meanings of words, and it was that inexhaustible, ever-wily beast which was his ultimate intellectual prey. Nevertheless, though he was a meticulous, almost a persnickety, scholar—quick to register a misspelling, grammatical solecism, rote usage, or factual error—he was too firmly grounded in the felt pulse of what he studied to be called "academic." It is not quite right to say that Guy lived through the ideas he entertained—there is a sense in which George Eliot's supreme pedant, Mr. Casaubon, did that. Rather, he understood that life is animated, for good and for ill, by ideas, and that a scrupulous regard for reality is the necessary accomplice of any genuine intellectual pursuit. Guy was a dazzlingly imaginative writer, but one whose final allegiance was to truth. Hence his respect for science, for the factual, for the

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ascertainable details of whatever subject happened to embrace him. It is telling that his first book, published in 1963, was about the nineteenth-century American naturalist Louis Agassiz.

Guy was the recipient of many awards and honors: the MacArthur, as mentioned, an O. Henry Award, a Morton Dauwen Zabel award for fiction from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, and many others. He wrote more than a score of books and contributed hundreds of essays and reviews to a galaxy of magazines: *Harper's*, *National Review* (to which he contributed regularly in the 1960s and 1970s), and many "little magazines." Guy was also a frequent contributor to *The New Criterion*, beginning in 1987 with a review of a translation of Proust's reflections on reading Ruskin.

Proust, Hawthorne, Kafka, Darwin, the naturalist and travel writer William Bartram, the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus, Augustus John, some recently published scientific writings by Thoreau, Gertrude Stein, Stephen Crane, Nabokov's lepidoptery, and *The Oxford Book of Comic Verse*: Guy juggled a multiplicity of subjects for *The New Criterion*. In 1992, in a review of a biography about Hawthorne, Guy summed up our master of Gothic fastidiousness in words that seem to us to apply to Davenport as much as to Hawthorne: "Quite early he learned to live in his imagination, though he also had the rare gift of living sanely and evenly in the practical world, taking his time with a patient diffidence." That combination of imaginative zeal, level sanity, and infinite patience is a quality that stamp everything Guy wrote.

One of the pleasures of reading Guy Davenport is learning things. This may sound like small beer, but think about it: how often do you actually learn something from reading an essay or review? Did you know that Thoreau invented and marketed the lead pencil? (He also, Guy tells us, invented raisin bread.) "The fascination this text holds for us," Guy wrote about *Faith in a Seed*,

> is precisely Thoreau's detective work in finding out how squirrels disperse seeds by making their winter store, and how birds drop part of their dinner, how winter wind sails seeds across snow, how "parachute seeds" ride the air. (The phrase is startling until we realize that we are in the age of ballooning, and thus of parachutes, long before the airplane.) Sherlock Holmes, we remember, invoked Thoreau in the matter of circumstantial evidence, "as when we find a trout in the milk."

In 1991, Guy reviewed a biography of Charles Darwin for us. The book was by a doctor called John Bowlby. Darwin suffered terribly from various ailments throughout his life. "Despite his genius," Guy noted, Darwin "was a sufferer of neuroses, constant illnesses (he vomited every afternoon at four), a kind of hysteria that took the form of gasping and palpitations, and seizures of depression in which he uncontrollably wept." Bowlby attempted a diagnosis and came up with Chagas Disease—plausible enough, since Darwin himself records being stung by an insect that could have carried the disease. The problem, Guy observes, is that Darwin's symptoms began six months earlier.

Bowlby's book sounds plenty interesting. But as usual, Guy brings an eye attuned to the extravagant implausibilities of the everyday. Darwin's sailing on *The Beagle*, he tells us, "was a stroke of fate."

> *The Beagle* had a naturalist (he abandoned ship in a snit at the first opportunity). Darwin was along for the very British reason that the captain was a gentleman who could only associate with other gentlemen, and on a four-year scientific journey one wants company. Captain FitzRoy (Bowlby spells him correctly, and is practically alone in so doing) might have been invented by Dickens. His mind was narrow, he had not a scrap of imagination, and he was a

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> pompous ass. Though he rose to admiral and governed New Zealand and sat on many naval boards, he was driven mad by knowing that he had harbored and dined with an atheist. While Bishop Wilberforce debated Huxley at Oxford, FitzRoy paced with a Bible before the crowd outside, shouting "The Book! The Book!" He later slit his own throat.

Guy couldn't take up a subject without leaving it richer. He deposited his learning with casual profligacy. There is always a name, a poem, a fact, an anecdote you did not know but wish you did (are glad, now, you do). He also also had something valuable to say about the subject he was discussing. (Again, this is not as common as you might think.) Reviewing *The Oxford Book of Comic Verse*, for example, Guy offers plenty of comic verses for our delectation that are not found in the anthology. But he also has some astute things to say about the task, the job of comedy. Satire is like a wasp. It causes, and is meant to cause, pain as well as elicit laughter. So it is not surprising that satire has often found itself on the wrong side of the law. "The Romans outlawed it," Guy notes,

> and several talented satirists found themselves living beyond the Oxus. But satire's little sister, Comedy, was civilized quite early and given the run of the house. Our understanding is that satire is sneaky, unfair, and takes no prisoners. He knows right from wrong, he has stern morals, and leaves bruises. Comedy is a free spirit, full of fun, and has no intention of explaining herself. In fact, much of her charm is in her mystery, in eluding the serious as successfully as a kitten who doesn't wish to be caught.

And how's this as a summary of Gertrude Stein's *oeuvre*? "It is the very literate equivalent of children playing in a sandbox. They are happy, busy, purposeful in their own way, but only angels know what they think they're doing." Guy's piece on la Stein also contains this splendid bit of sociological research:

> A few months ago [this was in 1993] Gertrude Stein was at a Lexington, Kentucky, bookstore, promoting her latest. I learned this by overhearing one sorority sweetheart shouting to another on campus: "It was fab seeing her in person! I mean, you know, Gertrude Stein!"
>
> It was Gloria Steinem at the bookstore, but what other American writer, forty-seven years dead, can claim a place in the sparse learning of the intrepidly illiterate?

Guy's last piece for us appeared in January 2004. It was an affectionate remembrance of his friend Hugh Kenner, the polymathic literary critic who had died a couple months before. Kenner's articulateness was proverbial, as was his garrulousness. Guy recalls his friend visiting once and "talking for three days."

We suspect Hugh Kenner was a very different sort of personality from Guy Davenport. But there were some amusing congruencies. In the 1970s, Guy recalls, Marshall McLuhan had written that maps came in at "such-and-such a date in the Renaissance, before which we had no geographical sense. I watched Hugh type a postcard to McLuhan: Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres. Yours, Hugh." That's a postcard Guy could have written and probably wished he had. But the real congruence between the two is summed up in Guy's commendation of his friend's literary style.

> Hugh's prose remains the envy of everybody who has ever tried to write. It is elegant in its hard simplicity, in its diction, and in its adherence to tradition. It modulated from book to book. . . . I have a feeling that most of Hugh's prose is on two levels. The upper one is as clear and forthright as Hazlitt; the second one is Hugh talking to himself more intelligently than he is willing to share with a half-literate public.

How clever (and how characteristic) of Guy to embed that bit of autobiography in his encomium for a departed friend.

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Journalism: Power without responsibility

by Kenneth Minogue

Stanley Baldwin's bitter jibe that journalists enjoy "the privilege of the harlot down the ages—power without responsibility"—still resonates. One reason is certainly because we recognize that—alas!—we cannot live without journalism. We might sometimes imagine that it is merely the stuff we read in the newspapers every day, but actually journalism is a mode in which we think. It indelibly marks our first response to everything. It dominates television and surrounds us in the vast publishing industry of popularization. The scholar and the professional may escape it as they specialize, but the moment they step outside what they really know about, they enter the flow of popularized understanding like the rest of us.

This means that journalism is a problem at two levels. Baldwin's jibe points to the profound idea that there is something essentially pathological about the whole activity that daily satisfies our often pointless curiosity about what is going on in the world. But there is a less extreme position that accords more with common sense: namely, that in our educated and democratic world, a great deal of information is indispensable, and journalism is the only way we can have it. Even here, however, large events such as the Iraq war of 2004 have caused many critics to judge that journalism has lost such integrity as it ever had and is being used to nudge us towards some version of right thinking. Journalism had slid, it has been suggested, into propaganda.

We thus have two theses to consider. The first is that journalism in itself is a pathological distortion of our civilization, and the second is that the perfectly respectable and certainly necessary trade of informing us about the world has lost its integrity and become, in some degree, a parody of truth—in a word, pathological. It is not entirely possible to separate these ideas, but let us take each in turn.

Journalism responds to the old Roman question: *Quid novi?*—What's new? The question only makes sense against a background of: What's old? The answer must be composed of things called "events," and, as the etymology of *eventus* suggests, an event is something understood as the outcome of some earlier situation. Event-making is an art that turns familiar routines and facts into patterns having a certain uniqueness. Some people are better at it than others, but once the art has been learned, most people can do it to some extent. It is all a matter of scale: the Bible tells some stories in a few sentences, while writers of fiction can spin someone's day into a long novel. Responding to stories is one way of conducting life, distinguishable from the times when we are

This essay is adapted from a lecture presented at "Power Without Responsibility: Was Kipling Right?," a conference sponsored by the Boston, Oxford, Melbourne Conversazione Society and held at Boston University on October 7–8, 2004.

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responding to routines, sensations, classifications, or reflections. No life can avoid gossip, ritual, and response to overriding events such as war or famine, but most people, especially if they are illiterate, have hitherto been interested in little beyond what affects them directly. Journalism is the cultivation of concern for things that are for the most part remote from us.

The basic contrast is with religion, which is concerned with rituals and sermons revolving around beliefs about our eternal situation. Kierkegaard mistrusted journalism because he thought it would feed our love of the ephemeral, and he was no doubt right about this. Hegel remarked that in his time, newspapers were replacing morning prayer. Perhaps the earliest writer to regard our involvement with daily events as a pathology distracting us from the realities of the human condition was Pascal. As journalism in the contemporary world has extended its range, it has certainly taken in churchly events and concerned itself with the beliefs of different religions, but the very context of such news robs it of the superior status it has for believers, and diminishes religion to the same level as the vast miscellany of other human activities that are also being reported. Religions are composed of archetypes that have a status above the constant flow of ideas and news stories. We respond (or do not respond) to such archetypes in a reflective manner that determines how we view the world, but where journalism dominates our thoughts, reflectiveness is diluted by the passion for novelty. We move from an article on religion to one on fashion, sport, or public affairs. Like democracy, journalism is a manic equalizer.

Historically, journalism emerged from the specific interests of princes, merchants, and administrators. A prince needed to know something of foreign powers, and his ambassador sent him back reports, just as a merchant needed to know of profitable opportunities and conditions of trade. A universal institution such as the Papacy needed a constant flow of information. The Greeks, Romans, Chinese, etc. were great annalists, and Herodotus is credited, as the father of History, with creating prose literature out of an assemblage of contingencies, but the drive of most of these writers was precisely to get beyond contingency and find a broader explanatory structure.

Printing, of course, transformed everything, leading to the movement of power away from grand patrons towards educated city-dwellers. Large political issues were argued out in books, pamphlets, and broadsheets. The writings of diplomats and merchants were soon being supplemented by correspondents writing for a wider audience. It was the beginning of the end for *arcana imperii*. By the eighteenth century, the flow of material was so reliable that publishers could be sure of filling an annual, a monthly, and ultimately a weekly or daily issue. This was the first and basic mechanical principle by which we became accustomed to a regular flow of news. Other mechanisms soon emerged to help the editor fill his space—the anniversary, for example, in which nothing related the writer and his subject but an interval of time.

Deeper currents were at work. The modern Western world was based upon a close interest in and observation of the things going on around us. The marvels of science in important respects result from a simple propensity to measure things and discover laws relating these measurements. In the early modern period, the value of history, and also of reports of events, consisted in their being able to point a lesson or generate a moral or practical bit of wisdom. The meaning of an event was to be found in its outcome. The Boston Museum of Fine Arts has a painting by Tiepolo, dated 1745–1750, called (in a rather Heideggerian idiom) *Time unveiling truth*. The allegory is complex and the painting (to my eyes) not without grossness, but the broad idea captures something of how practical men came to understand wisdom. The contrast must be with the religious assumption that the essential truths of life have been revealed,

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but that the human world is dark and devious, and the connection between events is obscure. Here we have the view that time will tell whether we have been right or wrong to rely on someone. The interest of a contingency is precisely that it cannot be assimilated to a law. To follow the course of events over time is therefore to discover truth. And one possible implication of this view is that to come later is to know more truth.

Journalism thus emerges from deep currents in our civilization. It has roots in Greek and Roman experience, and, from the Middle Ages onwards, a passion to follow the actual events of the world seems to have continually grown. Prose literature and the novel were part of that development, and whole new areas of event-making came to be opened up. The narratives relating to kings, aristocrats, and saints were broadened to include a more general concern with individual life. In a religious idiom of life, such diurnal events were mere froth on the surface of the infinite. But as Kierkegaard saw, the ephemeral was coming to dominate our interests.

The steady diffusion of a journalistic interest in what is going on affects our consciousness of the world we live in. A nun has a different mind-set from a housewife, a philosopher from a man of affairs, but journalism equips them all with a generalized interest in the world. One dimension of how journalism affects the way we think is our propensity to become bored. Someone who is focussed on the *novelty* of events as they unfold in the newspapers is to that extent less reflective about the events to which he responds. The details of change crowd out the time and energy that would otherwise go into reflection. Religious people, philosophers, or scientists—people who are genuinely educated, we might say—will think about God, or Nature, or literature, and will find new things in quite exiguous materials, whereas the less educated become increasingly miserable without a continual flow of novelty, and since most of reality is repetition, the novelty is a function of triviality. People become, in a word, shallow. Here then is a new form of consciousness evolving under the spur of improving technology to the point where twenty-four-hour news and comment is available to us.

Journalistic consciousness is imperialistic. It invades every sphere of life and takes it over. Consider the world of scholarship, in which men and women dedicate themselves to exploring some area of reality in terms of a particular mode of inquiry—as historians, scientists, or literary scholars, for example. Scholarship is hard, focussed work, continually retracing its steps to check on its validity as scholarly discussion proceeds. It knows nothing of the urgency of the deadline. The scholars who practice this art are often pedantic and stuffy, and certainly impatient with those who think they can master the subject in question without a lengthy apprenticeship. And for centuries scholars used to defend themselves against the contempt of practical men for what is "academic" with an entrenched disdain for journalism and popularization. The Cambridge English don F. R. Leavis detested nothing so passionately as Sunday newspaper reviewing. The Oxford historian A. J. P. Taylor never got the chair to which his abilities entitled him because (so it is plausibly said) he brought scholarship low by writing for newspapers.

Might I perhaps focus the point a little more sharply with another British example? Early in 2004, Bernard Levin died. He had been a notable figure of London journalism, both witty and wide-ranging. Many friends remembered his often setting the table on a roar, but few could come up with examples adequate to exhibit his wit. And then Matthew Parris, himself perhaps the pre-eminent columnist of the day, wrote about this. The problem, he suggested, was something deep in the nature of journalism: its absolute dependence on the moment of writing. Good journalism gains some of its impact from responding to the mind of the moment, and that is precisely what cannot fully be captured at a later moment. And indeed, it is hard to read journalism criti-

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cally without realizing the element of padding that goes into it.

The self-protective disdain of the scholar for the popularizer has now gone, or largely gone, and with its disappearance, journalism has been sloshing about in the world of scholarship. Scholars can now become popularizing celebrities without losing face, a further spread of the journalistic imperium. Worse, journalism has begun, by a curious conjunction of cultural tendencies, to invade the world of education. It has long been felt by teachers of subjects in the social sciences that a pupil's reading of the newspaper is an important part of his or her education. And with the decline of discipline in schools, the teacher can no longer command that his charges must learn what he thinks is the next part of their education. He is forced to seduce them, by the guile of a popularizing involvement with their own interests. Journalism's empire thus lies behind the rise of the impulse to make relevance the test of what is worth teaching in schools. A similar development is happening in universities as they expand to take in students with less native wits than before. Instead of the focus on method and discipline basic to education, many university courses have become interdisciplinary, which consists in focusing on some subject of broad popular interest, such as the environment, and investigating its problems in terms of a bit of science, a bit of history, a bit of practical wisdom, etc.

Journalistic consciousness, then, has spread into the wide field of the humanities and the social sciences. A journalist is the master of the gist of things, and gist is king of the world. The way it dominates contemporary politics might perhaps help to explain why in our time so much legislation has so frequently to be amended, corrected, and replaced.

Journalism may thus be taken as a systematic defiance of the Socratic maxim that wisdom consists in understanding one's *own ignorance*. We who belong to the world of journalism know a great deal, and are proud of it, and sanctify such knowledgeability in quiz programs and a disdain for those who cannot tell in what century the Civil War happened, or how many states make up the U.S. Stanley Baldwin thought that journalists were prostitutes—but how can knowing a lot be thought to be the satisfaction of a kind of lust? The answer is that journalism satisfies curiosity, a distant relative of the "wonder" thought to be the source of philosophy and science. How then, one must repeat, can curiosity be a vice? The answer is that we are often curious about things that are none of our business. The malicious village gossip is the most curious creature on earth, and finds her successor in the "door-stopping" journalist and the paparazzo infesting the lives of famous people. Further, curiosity is one of those learned human responses that is dependent on what other people are interested in. In a shallow way, we can easily be influenced to take an interest in something merely because others are curious about it.

The most evidently vicious kind of curiosity is morbid. Plato recognized this in arguing that the mind was an arena of conflict rather than a Pythagorean harmony. In the *Republic*, Socrates tells the story of Leontius, son of Aglaion: "On his way up from the Piraeus outside the north wall, he noticed the bodies of some criminals lying on the ground with the executioner standing by them. He wanted to go and look at them, but at the same time he was disgusted and tried to turn away. He struggled for some time and covered his eyes, but at last the desire was too much for him. Opening his eyes wide, he ran up to the bodies and cried, 'There you are, curse you; feast yourselves on this lovely sight!'" Some modern press photography is remarkable, almost an art (that of sport for example), but much that we see in tabloid journalism would disgust us had our sensibilities not been corrupted by learning to enjoy the satisfaction of this particular version of lust—the lust to see and know things of no concern to us. As Pascal remarks: "More often than not, curiosity is

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merely vanity. We only want to know something in order to talk about it."

Here then is another arena in which journalism has "colonized" our minds. The very availability of a rather illicit satisfaction has developed in us the very appetite itself. All of this is given some kind of ethical coloring in terms of the public's right to know, and indeed, it would be impossible in the modern world to draw a consistent line between genuinely appropriate objects of our curiosity and the bits of knowledge generously thrown our way. Indiscriminate absorption of information is the way we live. But there is another side to this richness of information available to us about the world we live in. It is that an endless preoccupation with ourselves as subsumed under social categories—as pensioners or teenagers, married or single, heterosexual or homosexual, and so on—dilutes our consciousness, and our identity spills out in all directions. We lose the focus that belongs to real individuality. We meld into others, becoming part of a strange kind of informational collectivity.

Until the twentieth century, people did not much consider the category of journalism. Some of what we would now recognize as such was the writing of educated men in books and quarterlies, and some was popular report for the masses. Reporters and newspapermen had relatively little professional standing. One thinks of twentieth-century newspaperman, according to the image in *The Front Page* and other fictions, as hard-headed drunks working with green eyeshades as they subbed copy in large offices. These were men who thought that journalism reported and therefore *reflected* the world, and that (as C. P. Scott put it) "facts are sacred and comment is free." They were empiricists who took the description of "reporter" seriously; they purported to "tell it as it was." To use the old logical formulation, "twenty killed in earthquake" was true if, and only if, twenty people had been killed in the earthquake. But at some point in the twentieth century, a familiar type of social evolution occurred. Journalism became a "profession" (rather than just a trade), and succumbed to the culture of universities.

The new sophisticated journalist had picked up a little learning and knew that a news story cannot be a mere "reflection" of events, because every event is infinitely complex, susceptible of many descriptions, and therefore that its meaning depends on the prior selection of the reporter. Journalism was something *constructed*. This view thus reflected the then popular vogue for mechanical images of "construction" and "invention" in the humanities and social sciences. Here was a theory that transformed the life of your humble journalist. He, or she, was no longer a mere agent of transmission, transferring facts to print. The journalist became an actual creator of news. Journalists were not, indeed, quite the same as novelists, but some element of creativity was thought necessary to report even the least significant bit of news. It was in part this cast of mind that led to the explosion of signed reports and photographs of the contributors to newspapers, and of the proliferation of columns. The result was an immense vogue among young people for becoming journalists. It was for the most part clean regular work, allowing plenty of self-expression without accountability, and it required no vast input of learning, or indeed remarkable talent of any kind.

Up to a point, both the reflection and the construction views of journalism capture some of its real features. A little light epistemology might have been a pretty harmless addition to journalistic self-understanding had it not soon mutated into a kind of Salvationism. Quite how this mutation occurred is a very large question indeed, but it can best be understood in terms of a similar process happening in most of the professions in the second half of the twentieth century. Teachers came to think that, because they were custodians of the minds of the rising generation, they held the key to social progress. Spreading the right ideas in the classroom would diminish violence and

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prejudice in the next generation, so molding the attitudes of the young became at least as important as education itself. Similarly, lawyers sought to expand beyond the dry technicalities of the law in order to make society more just, and many a doctor embracing epidemiology was less concerned with curing his patients than with instructing them about a better lifestyle. The idea of social responsibility—that we are all the molders of our society—spread far and wide, even into the temples of profit. We may summarize this by saying that all of these professionals began to acquire the affectations of an elite possessed of saving knowledge. In the case of journalists, this encounter with epistemology turned into a form of political partisanship.

The issue was often expounded in terms of the concept of "bias." In the game of bowls, a certain distortion (known as "bias") tests the skill of the player, and metaphorically, the subjective element in the interpretation of an event might be described as "bias." No one doubted that such subjectivity was a distortion, but it was generally held that truth could emerge from discussion and criticism. The new doctrine insisted—at its least sophisticated—that since no judgement was unbiased, any utterance was as good as any other. Any claim to neutrality was treated with particular scorn. Whereas a generation before, facts had been distinguished as the hard stuff of truth by contrast with values, which were merely the porous vehicles of feeling and preference, now facts themselves lost their claim to superiority. Cultural analysts dissolved truth into power, following the lead of Michel Foucault.

It is a familiar feature of the history of philosophy that skepticism's partner is dogmatism. The dogmatism emerging from this particular bout of skepticism held that all cultures were equally valid, and that all utterances, as expressing opinion, were equal, at least in this fundamental respect. They could only be discriminated in terms of some sort of notional "correctness."

The Salvationism in this doctrine consisted in the belief that *in* being skeptical of all universal claims, the journalist as critical thinker was revealing a sophistication superior to that of the average voter. The test of such critical sophistication was that the journalist held opinions liberated from the influence of his or her milieu, and the milieu was taken to include not merely class or nation, but European civilization itself. Journalists saw themselves as "free floating intellectuals" in a world of prejudice and superstition. This pleasing self-image was often complemented by the further opinion that the critical thinker had unmasked the hidden partisanship in our common belief that Western civilization was superior to other forms of life. This civilizational self-criticism commonly took a moral form, applying the higher moral abstractions (such as human rights, anti-imperialism, and racial equality) to European societies themselves, and projecting this criterion back down the ages in a massive indictment of our ancestors. Collective guilt was discovered to be the appropriate response to a great deal of Western conduct, ranging from the Crusades to Slavery and Apartheid. Some enthusiasts demanded official apologies, and some politicians (Tony Blair among them) gave them. Skeptical non-judgmentalism had strangely morphed into dogmatic condemnation, generating a strange kind of collective guilt, from which the critic could absolve himself by his very recognition of it.

The history of this process, in the universities (especially the universities) and journalism schools of the Western world, is of course immensely complicated, but without referring to it, one cannot begin to understand why our addiction to journalism is virtually inseparable from our dislike of it. The crudest way of formulating our dislike would be to say that the picture of the world presented in newspapers and television programs jars with our political opinions. The discontent is greater among those on "the right" than those on "the left" but both share it. And here the discontent must

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seem odd, because journalists pride themselves on covering, or trying to cover, all points of view. "Points of view" is, of course, a vulgarizing simplicity that can recognize only those for, and those against, some all-too-familiar opinion. We have all, no doubt, been amused by the absurdities of the television interviewer swinging back and forth between two opposing personages, putting in a mechanically extreme way the opposed opinion (suitably made extreme) to its opponent.

No one, I think, seriously believes that the academic sophistication that journalists have acquired helps them give a better account of the world. We are no better informed today than we were when reporters told us how it was. Indeed, all shades of opinion regard "the media" with deep suspicion as giving a biased account of reality. Some bold journalists embrace this universal unpopularity as proof of a perverse kind of integrity, but early in the twenty-first century, it is hard to resist the view that, indispensable as it is in modern democracies, journalism is an increasingly pathological influence on the way we live.

For all their affectations of the critical spirit, journalists are putty in the hands of the latest intellectual fashion. What they have to say is dangerously linked to the posture they intend to reveal in saying it. Their basic moral stance must be an unrelenting concern with truth, and it is in this sense that journalism reveals itself as an essentially Western practice. For it has often been observed that ours is a "truth-obsessed" civilization. By "truth" here, we mean something rather beyond mere correspondence with facts; we must incorporate in the word an element, harder to define, of integrity. A really good journalist needs a sturdy ballast of good sense and an almost scholarly revulsion from the quick and the glib in order to transcend the corruptions that have surfaced over the last century.

It would no doubt be perilous to think that all Victorian journalists were more serious than our contemporaries, but in writers like Bagehot and Leslie Stephen we have figures who worked on the frontiers of journalism and scholarship without losing their integrity. It may be merely that the temptations of cheap sensationalism were less at that period than they are now, or it may just be that they had more space.

It was, however, in the nineteenth century that literary realism took the form in which it became the guiding star of modern journalism. Novelists such as Dickens and Zola were certainly not the first to explore "low life," but they extended the boundaries of social understanding in order to incorporate the experiences of socially insignificant people into the materials of drama, and also to reveal some of the realities—usually poverty, vice, and oppression—"behind" the facades of the time. The crucial ideas of this literary movement were those of journalists themselves—indeed both Dickens and Zola had been journalists in their time. The basic idea of literary realism is that life is a theater put on for show, and that reality is what you find when you go behind the scenes. Reality, in other words, is something concealed by those whose interest lies in concealment. The posture of the journalist is thus that of the investigator debunking institutions by exposing secrets.

This general theory clearly domesticates scandal and conspiracy as instruments of revelation. The custodians of ritual and authority are, of course, particularly vulnerable to criticism of this form. Their outward aspect is their essential point, and what lies behind them may well be banal, or worse. We have here a view of reality that cannot distinguish between those things whose inwardness has no bearing on their force, and those things where hypocrisy or dissimulation may be usefully revealed.

Journalism begins, then, in genuinely "sensational" events such as wars, earthquakes, and the rise and fall of governments, but it can multiply sensation by getting "behind" the events. Some social personages—royalty, politicians, actors, etc.—are worthy of note in themselves, but even better is to discover how they behave

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"behind the scenes." Spontaneous irritation is thought to be more revealing than measured dignity, a little light lust than a policy of self-control. Recent philosophy has been strongly influenced by the so-called "philosophers of suspicion"—Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud—but in journalism we find suspicion as the constitutive passion of an entire practice.

The rational basis of modern journalism, its claim to our attention as bringing us knowledge of the world, thus turns out to be the practice of revealing what other people want to hide from us. This is, of course, particularly true of what authority wants to hide. The First World War was a watershed in the growth of cynicism about authority. People came to think that the official account of almost anything was generally wrong. Here then we find the beginnings of the journalistic posture of indignation as the reporter demands "full disclosure" of whatever the public might be thought to have a right to know.

Such is the rational basis of journalism, but it is important never to ignore the passions it may be supposed to feed? Baldwin, as we have seen, thought it supplied the demand for a kind of lust almost as powerful as the sexual, and perhaps less linked to vigorous youth—the passion for scandal. What journalism most obviously supplies is "sensations" or small shocks of pleasurable surprise because something unexpected has happened, and the journalistic "story" itself may incorporate the contexts within which it was unexpected. But what if the small shock is the discovery of some change in the private life of someone celebrated? Here we would have a case of Pascal's idle and pointless curiosity, the malice of the village gossip in earlier times writ large. Perhaps the best comment on this is Goethe's "No man is a hero to his valet de chambre," to which Hegel added: "not because the hero is not a hero, but because the valet is a valet."

It is in expressing this impulse towards psychological valetism, a lowering and demeaning passion, that journalism clearly loses any real contact with its immemorial mission to understand political realities, the mission of the ambassador writing to his prince.

As it has evolved, journalism has bent to conform to that universal passion of our civilization: entertainment. So far as most people up until quite recent times were concerned, amusements and entertainments were rare treats. This seriousness of workaday practicality may well have made church services more tolerable, and it certainly conduced to a more reflective cast of mind, for, as Pope remarked, "amusement is the happiness of those that cannot think." In our time, however, radio, television, books, magazines, and a ubiquity of music have had the result that a quiet mind is a rare luxury for many people. Given that most of the information in our ever-expanding journalistic world is of no direct concern to us, it follows that the basic point of most journalism is to entertain. Just as freaks and bearded ladies amazed us in the past, so too do the remarkable private contortions of people we do not know arouse our wonder and astonishment today. This merger between journalism and entertainment is unmistakably evident in the way newspapers treat the news, and at a higher level it is replicated in the corporate expansion by which, for example, the same company may control film, television, and newspapers. And I am not, in saying this, hinting at corporate conspiracy. The corporate connections merely set the seal on a process that had long been bubbling up internally out of the developing dynamics of journalism itself.

We are all familiar with many of the corrupting devices of modern journalism—the hopeless addiction to pointless puns in headlines, the treating of politics as if it were a sports contest, the turning of rivalries into "rows" by talking up competition into conflict and hatred. In its pursuit of revelations, journalism has corrupted the servants and employees of famous people and made the vilest of crimes a paying proposition. But evident corruption is the least danger we face from journalism.

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For how much "truth" can any human activity sustain? I am not here recommending a philosophy of Machiavellian deception, but merely pointing to the familiar fact that to act is to focus one's understanding on the pros and cons of a project, with an inescapable loss of perspective. To act and to philosophize action are two separate and incompatible activities. One cannot do both at once. But the journalist takes up a posture notionally above the battle, and therefore thinks he has little difficulty avoiding the obvious peaks of partisanship with which he is familiar, so long as he can recognize them. Is he then, a kind of philosopher? If he is a passably honest journalist, he will give "left" and "right" more or less equal time, at least so long as he gets the difference right. He understands that there are two sides to a war, and may well parade his neutrality by giving extra mileage to our opponents. Accused of distortion, he takes satisfaction in his own consistency: he is not reporting conflict as a partisan, but as a neutral observer, though he would today be edgy about the term "neutral." Here is indeed a kind of integrity, but it is integrity whose orientation depends on fluid and moving points.

But I repeat: how much truth can any human activity sustain? In religious activities, the point is ritual and feeling, not truth, and an insistence upon truth (as empirically understood) is a category error, and often a destructive one. With too much truth, the glory in war gets lost in the details of blood and body bags. Universities depend on finding themselves in a dark and obscure corner of social life largely free from social pressures. Were they to be forced to explain themselves partially or prematurely, they would sound foolish and pretentious, and scholarship would be diverted into righteousness. The ceaseless glare of light from journalism illuminates the dark places in our civilization—and sterilizes many of them. No doubt a significant part of this illumination may prevent evils and expose things that ought to be exposed, but it also takes some immemorial human activities to the brink of extinction.

Indeed, journalism exposes things that perhaps ought to be exposed, and prevents evils, but by that very token, it becomes a practical player in the world, and thus finds itself in contradiction with its own posture as a critic above the battles of partisans. In adopting a posture of oppositionality to everything powerful, established, pretentious, and superior, it embraces a kind of universal skepticism, perhaps indeed of nihilism. Some journalists can indeed sustain an opportunistic negativism about everything, but most cannot, and in fact a meta-moralistic addiction to tolerance, secularism, ecumenism, and anti-discrimination becomes evident as what one might initially call "the journalistic ideology." To hold an opinion is to mortgage a certain amount of pleasure and pain to the turn of events. What confirms one's opinion gives pleasure, what seems to refute it, pain.

The journalist, living amidst opinions, knows by instinct the pains of being caught out holding a vulnerable opinion. The first move in his professionalization, as it were, must therefore be to evacuate any position that might be explained by others as arising from his own interest: anything having to do with class, nationality, or civilization: all such inherited baggage must be abandoned by the journalist. The problem is that whoever abandons interests—which have about them a certain discussable reality, where compromise is possible—finds that his stock of opinions consists of abstract ideas. These will usually take an ethical form, and that impels them towards righteousness. Any such package of opinions is likely to irritate patriots and partisans of all kinds. The holder of such a position is usually enormously self-satisfied, because, having arrived there by the process of identifying extremes as things to be challenged and questioned, he fancies himself as having all the rationality of an Aristotelian mean. In fact, he has arrived at a form of Whiggery—

"A levelling, rancorous, rational sort of mind

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That never looked out of the eye of a saint
Or out of a drunkard's eye."

But as the sage in Yeats's poem adds: "All's Whiggery now." For us, it's all journalism.

It seems a vile thing to take so serious a view of the newspapers we read with pleasure every day, and the radio and television that entertain us endlessly, but it is no business of philosophers, any more than of journalists, to reinforce our lazy habits. All civilizations are built upon specific distortions of reality, and ours is particularly concerned with observing, measuring and responding to the discrete objects in terms of which we construe reality. Journalism is a development of this cast of mind, and may be contrasted with other possible worlds, in one version of which we might focus our attention upon what we conceive to be eternal things. Christian writers have been prominent in stigmatizing an interest in ephemera as a dissipation of spiritual energies. The very fact that the journalistic world can focus its attention on nothing for more than a few days at a time, forever seeking a new sensation, makes it clear that this judgment on journalism as one of the pathologies of our civilization should be taken seriously.

Change the focus, and we may take journalism as an inescapable development of our Western adventures into literacy and education for all, so that it becomes the mode by which we take our bearings in a rich and exciting world. Journalism now becomes a category of its own, alongside science and history, as something to be valued in its own terms. But what are its own terms? We cannot avoid discovering that these terms constantly change, partly in response to ideas about truth, such as reflection and construction, and partly in response to the demands that the customers of journalism make upon it. We have suggested that the terms of journalism conceal self-contradiction. A pseudo-philosophical commitment to evade partisanship turns at this level into a partisanship of its own. And not the least of the paradoxes we find in examining journalism is that this most Western of all practices should embrace so anti-Western a stance. The logical problem journalists face parallels that of liberals who embrace all lawful forms of freedom, only to be told that this apparent openness is itself a form of concealed partisanship. Liberalism and journalism, we might say, are virtually Siamese twins among the commitments of our civilization, and their fates are bound up together.

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Philip Larkin's "element"

by Dan Jacobson

Philip Larkin died in 1985, at the age of sixty-three. Even before his death he had come to be regarded in Britain as a kind of national institution, rather than as just another distinguished writer. His poems were the most widely quoted and anthologized of any Englishman whose career fell within the second half of the twentieth century; he had (grumblingly) received innumerable awards, prizes, medals, and honorary doctorates; he had been made the subject of various television and radio programs and collections of laudatory essays, twice been decorated by the Queen, elected to a Visiting Fellowship of All Souls' College and an Honorary Fellowship of St. John's College, both in Oxford, and, finally, offered the post of Poet Laureate by Margaret Thatcher during her period as prime minister. (He declined the offer on the grounds that he had by then already dried up as a poet.) Despite his well-advertised insularity of outlook and distaste for "abroad," he had also gone to Hamburg to receive that city's Shakespeare Prize for his contribution to English literature. (He once said that he wouldn't mind going to China provided he come home on the same day.) The memorial service after his death was held in Westminster Abbey: an acknowledgment of services rendered which is granted only to the country's most prominent public figures.

After all that, the early unveiling of a plaque to his memory in Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey—or even perhaps a move to have him buried there, along with Dryden, Tennyson, and Browning—might have been expected. Some such act of recognition would have seemed appropriate not only because his work was so highly regarded by general readers and university critics alike, but because of the quasi-"nationalistic" sentiments he had latterly expressed both in his verse and critical prose. Having got over his adolescent infatuation with the poetry of W. B. Yeats and W. H. Auden, Larkin had programmatically opposed the international "Modernism" (manifested above all in the work of Eliot and Pound, "those culture-mongering American expatriates," as he described them) that had seemed to carry everything before it during the first half of the twentieth century. In contrast, he had asserted the values of a specifically home-grown tradition of English verse-making which, he believed, was characterized by clarity, directness, modesty, accessibility, and truth to locality.

"Plain language, the absence of posturing, sense of proportion, humour, abandonment of the dithyrambic ideal"—that was one of Larkin's rapid sketches of the ideal he ostensibly set for himself and others. Naturally there were critics in England and elsewhere who for these very reasons dismissed his poems as "provincial," "timid," and "unadventurous," but the suffrage of almost all dedicated readers of poetry in Britain went against them. Towards the end of his life the

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sense that English readers had of him as peculiarly and intimately "their" poet was reinforced by the elegiac tone of many of his later poems. In "Homage to a Government," "Going, Going," "Show Saturday," and others like them, he spoke with sorrow of a country that appeared to be losing a living sense of its domestic and imperial past, and was discarding its own ways and traditions—whether "folk" or "high" or both at the same time—without even knowing that it was doing so.

Yet it was precisely in relation to his view of England overall that his *Selected Letters*, edited by Anthony Thwaite, and Andrew Motion's biography *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* produced an outcry against everything he had done and was believed to represent. How could anyone think of him as a poet and public figure worthy of a memorial in Poets' Corner when in letters and remarks to his friends he had written and spoken in such vile terms of Britain's new, dark-skinned immigrants and of the countries they came from? His distaste for "niggers" and "coonland" was bad enough; no better, for many readers, was his longstanding addiction to pornography and to fantasies about underage girls—especially as these ran alongside litanies of complaint against the grown-up women in his life for being calculating and irrational, weak and strong, stupid and crafty, humiliatingly indispensable to someone like himself, yet always taking up more time than they were worth. In the poetry, his misogynistic murmurs—and more than murmurs—had usually been taken to express nothing worse than a half-humorous, half-serious bloody-mindedness, his version of that "harmless rebellion against virtue" which George Orwell (in writing about saucy seaside postcards) had affectionately described as "a permanent tendency in the human mind . . . which is always there and will always find its own outlet, like water." But the letters and biography suggested that something darker was at work here, more obsessive, less assimilable to anyone's idea of *knockabout fun*.

Nor did such outbursts and nagging complaints exhaust all that readers found disconcerting in the two memorial volumes. There was his habitual use of foul language, particularly but not exclusively in earlier years, which comes across at times like a kind of scribal Tourette's Syndrome, afflicting not the victim's tongue but his writing hand. There was his inexhaustible, claustrophobic preoccupation with himself—his health, his work, his lodgings, his dislikes, his women (or their absence)—alternating with equally elaborate expressions of self-disgust and self-deprecation. (Those too being just another form of self-absorption.) There was his manifest envy of contemporary poets on his side of the Atlantic (Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney) whose fame threatened to outstrip his own, and his tireless attempts—in reverse mode, so to speak—to foster the reputations of comfortably middlebrow writers of much less consequence than himself (John Betjeman the poet, Barbara Pym the novelist) who clearly presented no threat to him or to his own reputation.

The rumpus that followed the publication of the Thwaite and Motion volumes took a predictable form. On one side were readers who adopted a hearty, what's-all-the-fuss-about attitude towards the belated "revelations" which, they claimed, had revealed nothing of consequence—nothing, anyway, that had a significant bearing on the merits of his poetry or even on his character as a man. The reactionary views, abusive remarks, and scabrous bits of unpublished verse appearing in the letters showed Larkin putting on a performance, taking up attitudes which he knew would amuse right-wing friends like Kingsley Amis and Robert Conquest, and would scandalize all the solemn liberals and *bien-pensants* Lefties he despised. (Exactly the kind of people who were now doing their best to destroy his reputation.) In critical debate and in his everyday dealings with others, he had invariably been courteous and kindly. His poems about the women he cared for showed great delicacy and intensity of feeling, and so did his letters to them.

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Throughout his working life, he had been a skilled and conscientious university librarian who had won the affection of scores of men and women who worked under him. Whatever he may have said about "niggers" privately, in public he had always made plain his sense of gratitude, even of reverence, towards the black jazz musicians (Armstrong, Bechet, Ellington, and others), about whom he produced a sustained body of critical writings—and in relation to whom he had argued that the great art-form of the blues did not reveal a "natural melancholy" on the part of African-Americans, as some (white) people liked to imagine, but was a consequence of their entire race having been "cheated and bullied and starved" over the centuries. Finally, his defenders pointed out, if we were all to be as uninhibited as Larkin in putting on paper our hidden selves, our private resentments and involuntary lusts, how many of us would emerge any more attractively from our posthumously published scribblings than he had? And how many of us would reveal in them anything like his wit and inventiveness?

So much for the defense. Ranged on the other side were those who claimed that the near-idolization of the man and his work by the British Establishment revealed the truth about its real attitudes towards foreigners, women, the working-class, and the country's newly arrived minorities. In effect, his detractors asserted, Larkin had devoted his life to flattering a white, middle-class readership and assuaging its anxieties about the revolutionary changes that had overtaken the country's social order and international standing. His nostalgia for the cozy domesticities and marauding imperial certainties of the past was mirrored perfectly in his detestation of Modernism and in the unreconstructed, old-fashioned prosody of his verse. Ultimately, perhaps, little more needed to be said about the man than that he was the favorite modern poet of the hated, reactionary, "warmongering" Mrs. Thatcher. In the excited words of Tom Paulin—himself a writer and a teacher of literature in Oxford and elsewhere—the publication of Larkin's *Letters* and *Life* had starkly revealed "the sewer under the national monument [that] Larkin became."

There the matter rests—or rather, slumbers uneasily. The website of his fan club, the Philip Larkin Society, with its headquarters in Hull, the city in which he had made his home, continues to offers to members and visitors a variety of "study days," "Philip Larkin walks," evenings of "readings, anecdote and reminiscence (glass of wine included)," conferences, and the like. All of which, I am sure, would have pleased Larkin greatly and provoked him to volleys of scathing adjectives, obscene and otherwise. But canonization? No. The elevation of him to the status of a great and blessedly comprehensible English poet? Doubtful. The launch of a campaign to have a plaque bearing his name put up in Poets' Corner? I suspect not. Not for a long time, anyway.

Yeats once wrote that out of a poet's quarrel with others he produces rhetoric; out of his quarrel with himself, poetry. It is an often-quoted remark, but like others of its kind, it doesn't stand up to inspection. "Poetry" and "rhetoric" are not antithetical terms. The better a poem is, the less distinguishable from each other will be its "poetic" and "rhetorical" elements. For all the conversational intimacy of tone that marks so many of Larkin's poems, they are again and again given to making what the late Ian Hamilton, one of Larkin's most astute critics, described as "great, haunting statements about love and death." Such statements often come at the end of a poem, as in "An Arundel Tomb" (". . . to prove/ Our almost instinct almost true:/ What will survive of us is love"), or the title-poem of his last collection, "High Windows," where what can be seen beyond the eponymous windows is only "deep blue air, that shows/ Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless"). Yet as often as not statements of this kind will be undercut in the poem itself by a dismissive shrug, or a lewd phrase, or a bleak gesture of acceptance—each of these being, in context, both rhetorical and poetic,

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the record of one more episode in the author's never-ceasing arguments with both himself and others. In the phrases quoted above from "An Arundel Tomb," for example, we hear the undermining going on within the sonority of the poem's conclusion—which speaks with unflinching precision of an *almost* instinct which is *almost* true. Nothing more.

Larkin's mature poetry is seldom obscure, but it is always more complicated than either his admirers or detractors generally wish to believe. Even the most simple-seeming of his poems emerges from positively Nietzschean depths of self-contradiction; they are born out of thoughts, impulses, and emotions in a state of internecine conflict with one another. From his letters it is clear that nothing mattered more to him than his writing: it was his refuge from his unsatisfactory relations with friends, lovers, and members of his family, and (as he was ready to admit from time to time) the reason why such relationships were bound to remain unsatisfactory. Or, to put it more accurately, why he felt compelled to keep them that way. Morally and psychologically it seems to have been impossible for him to reach forward—for a woman, for a mood, for self-transcendence in any form—without retracting; and he could not retract without sorrowing for whatever he had just felt himself compelled to renounce.

Thus, for all their translucence, the poems by Larkin most worth going back to—and there are a large number of them, relative to his overall output—do not merely arise from self-division but are explicitly *about* self-division. Each recreates an irresolvable, tripartite argument between the poet's delight in the shapes and satisfactions of this world ("reaching forward"); his preemptive withdrawal ("retraction") from them in the face of the certainty of death, which takes everything from everyone, himself included; and his hunger for a realm (which by definition is unattainable) where this three-way tug-of-war is replaced by a consciousness of "infinity and absence, the beauty of somewhere you're not . . . where there's neither oppressed nor oppressor, just freedom." For him, this imaginary realm can be approached only through the creation and enjoyment of art—through poetry, fiction, and music. (Though a poem like "The Card-Players" and various scattered references in his letters suggest that he spent a great deal of time, in his youth especially, looking at pictures.)

Denial as a form of affirmation (and vice versa), disappointment as the condition of creativity (and vice versa): couplings and transformations like these can be seen at every level of Larkin's work. Take, for example, the apparently "abstract" issue of his espousal of an anti-Modernist poetic ideology. Yes, he prided himself on being typically, old-fashionedly "English" in his insularity, his aversion to going abroad, his indifference to what foreigners got up to in the unfortunate parts the world they were condemned to live in. Yes, he spoke disdainfully of the Modernist revolution in poetry, and chose in his own verse to cling to traditional English rhyme and stanza forms. Yet the debts he owed to his Modernist predecessors reveal themselves again and again in the subjects, syntax, and patterns of imagery in his verse. (Not to speak of the four-letter words he used in the poems whenever he needed them—a freedom which Modernists like Joyce, Lawrence, Henry Miller and others had made it possible for him to employ, and enjoy.) It is wholly typical of him that he should say about the last line of one of his own poems, "Absences," that "it sounds like a slightly unconvincing translation from a French symbolist"—and then add wistfully, "I wish I could write like that more often." (The line in question, consisting of just seven words and two exclamation points, refers to the sea and sky as "Such attics cleared of me! Such absences!") Parallel passages and poems abound in the three major volumes of verse he left behind. "Sad Steps," for instance, opens unpromisingly with the speaker of the poem "Groping back to bed after a piss" and then, after

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parting the curtains, finding himself staring in astonishment at the full moon—"High and preposterous and separate—/ Lozenge of love! Medallion of art!" In a companion poem, "Solar," the sun makes its appearance in the first line simply as "Suspended lion face," with no explanatory gloss or preceding article; the poem ends with this supposedly most cautious and fretful of poets finding an unexpected, ungrudging, and wholly human term of praise for the inhuman power he has been apostrophizing throughout: "Unclosing like a hand,/ You give forever."

Larkin is today almost as famous as Thomas Hardy (his chief poetical mentor) was for his "pessimism." It is true that Larkin himself once remarked ironically that "desolation" was to him what "daffodils were to Wordsworth." Yet how characteristic of him, too, is it that he should write with more passion than any other poet known to me of the unstable splendors of the English summer: its heat, its fullness, heaviness, leafiness, the sultriness of its airs, and the ever-changing densities of its light. Look at such poems as "Cut Grass," "Here," "The Whitsun Weddings," "Solar," even the visionary "Explosion." In a poem written early in his career, and left unpublished until the appearance of his posthumous *Collected Poems*, he described himself as "summer-born/ And summer-loving"—and so he was, though in that same poem he confesses how inadequate he feels himself to be to "the emblems of perfect happiness" that summer days should represent.

Larkin wrote of Hardy's poetry:

> it cannot be denied that the dominant emotion in Hardy is sadness. Hardy was peculiarly well equipped to perceive the melancholy, the misfortunate, the frustrating, the failing elements of life. . . . Any approach to his work, as to any writer's work, must seek to determine what element is peculiarly his, which imaginative note he strikes most plangently; and to deny that in his case it is the sometimes gentle, sometimes bitter, but always passive apprehension of suffering is, I think, wrong-headed.

Is this just a thinly disguised portrait of Larkin himself? Only up to a point. One notices the self-revealing suggestion that readers would normally search in the first instance for the most "plangent" note struck by the author. Certainly that was Hardy's "peculiar . . . element." But why shouldn't readers look also for the notes which "a writer" strikes most strongly, most cheerfully? There are some writers—Byron, for example—whose plangent note is the one they might least wish to listen to. And as for the "passive apprehension of suffering"—no, for all the regret which pervades so much of Larkin's work, that is not really its most characteristic element. Its "apprehensions" are pervaded by regret, certainly, but they are qualified also by rebelliousness and angry humor; his verse is attentive not so much to suffering—not as we ordinarily think of it, anyway—but to the pains of change and impermanence, the pathos of our fleeting experience of the world.

As a young man, Larkin aspired to follow Hardy in becoming both a novelist and a poet, and in his early twenties he published two colorless, spiritless novels, *Jill* and *A Girl in Winter*. In a conversation I had with him almost three decades after the appearance of the second of those books, he confessed that his failure to complete a third novel, which he had been intermittently working on for several years, led to what he described as "the unhappiest part of my life, creatively." (He did not know then that the last dozen years of his life were to be almost as unhappy, creatively speaking, and that he would produce in them no more than a tiny handful of poems worth collecting—though one of them, "Aubade," is among the finest he wrote.) One result of his abandonment of his ambitions as a novelist was a conscious decision to bring into his verse the interests and range of emotions which he had previously believed could be expressed only in novels (including the right to be "colloquial . . . funny or flippant if I felt like it," as he said on

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the same occasion.) Some of Larkin's funny or flippant poems are brilliantly successful—both in themselves, as it were, and for reaching a public that would generally swerve away from poetry of any kind. Others appear too easily content with putting the boot into life in general, or, with even greater zeal, putting the same boot into the "indigestible sterility" of the "I" who speaks in the poems. (Who of course both is and is not the person *writing* them.)

Once he had made up his mind that he had no choice but to draw into his poems a wider range of experience than he had previously thought they could contain, Larkin set about developing a diction which could move easily from the quotidian to the elevated and back again—and could do it in a multitude of tones and contexts. This, for him, became indistinguishable from acquiring the ability to sustain grammatically elaborate sentences over lengthy, formal poetic structures, without the "voice" of the poem losing either its intimacy or power. Not every one of his poems fulfills these demands, of course, but a high proportion do. Again and again, the reader becomes aware that a poem has changed in key without rising in volume, so to speak, and that what might have sounded casual a moment before has become passionate, melodic, unforgiving. The improbable musical parallel I am most insistently reminded of in reading many of Larkin's poems is not his beloved jazz, but opera, with its busy, continuing life and its unpredictable swellings and lapses of emotion.

A single poetic "device" which Larkin uses repeatedly in both longer and shorter poems can best illustrate what I mean here. "The Building" is a long poem of nine stanzas, each consisting of seven lines—aside from a final, detached line standing on its own—that rhyme irregularly not only with lines in the same verse but also with others at varying distances. Of the nine stanzas, only the first ends with a punctuation point; all the others "cross" with no break in grammar or meaning from the last line of one stanza to the first line of the next. The effect is to slow down the pace of the entire poem while simultaneously giving it a sense of irresistible momentum. The anonymous "building" of the poem's title turns out to be a huge hospital, seen at first from a distance ("Higher than the handsomest hotel . . ."), and a moment later from within, in one of its waiting rooms. This room is described in terms that could hardly be more quotidian in detail and neutral in tone ("There are paperbacks and tea at so much a cup . . ."), and the same matter-of-fact language is used about the random selection of people gathered there. Yet from one neutral-sounding line to the next a significant shift in tone takes place; something grimmer and more foreboding enters the poem ("outdoor clothes and half-filled shopping bags/ And faces restless and resigned . . ."). Then, at the end of the third stanza and the beginning of the fourth, comes this—

> some are young,
> Some old, but most at that vague age that claims
> The end of choice, the last of hope; and all
>
> Here to confess that something has gone wrong.

It is extraordinary that such grave music can be wrung from a sequence of simple monosyllables (twenty-nine in total, with just two bisyllables among them), following without incongruity on the dropped gloves and shopping bags mentioned just a moment before. It is remarkable too how deftly these solemn assonances ("that vague age that claims/ The end of choice, the last of hope . . ."), combined with the crucial verb "confess," put in the reader's mind the notion of a judgment, perhaps a last judgment, fateful for the person involved. These touches, however, would have much less effect if it were not for the white, hanging, unpunctuated space between the two stanzas that mark a sudden suspension and resumption of the narrative, and succeed in giving a wholly unpredictable weight to the

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sundered yet inseparable little words "all" and "Here."

There are eight such "crossings-over" between stanzas in the poem, each of them both faltering and resolute in the same manner, each rather like a bird coming to rest on a particular branch, only to change direction at the last moment and take off again unexpectedly. Here is another example of this kind of movement, another crossover between the sixth and seventh of the poem, like the one quoted above yet strikingly different from it too:

> Look down into the yard. Outside seems old
> enough:
> Red brick, lagged pipes, and someone walking
> by it
> Out to the car park, free. Then, past the gate,
> Traffic; a locked church; short terraced streets
> Where kids chalk games, and girls with
> hair-dos fetch
>
> Their separates from the cleaners—O world,
> Your loves, your chances, are beyond the
> stretch
> Of any hand from here!

From Chaucer onwards, poets have run stanzas without a break from one to the next, either "accidentally" or "on purpose," so to speak, but I know of no one who uses the technique as frequently and boldly as Larkin. The transition can strike one like a sudden catch of breath under the stress of emotion; it can also, as in "Sunny Prestatyn," a poem about a girl on an advertising poster for a seaside resort, be used for comic effect. (Yet—need it be said?—not comic ends only.)

> She was slapped up one day in March.
> A couple of weeks, and her face
> Was snaggle-toothed and boss-eyed;
> Huge tits and a fissured crotch
> Were scored well in, and the space
> Between her legs held scrawls
> That set her fairly astride
> A tuberous cock and balls
>
> Autographed *Tich Thomas*, while
> Someone had used a knife
> Or something to stab right through
> The moustached lips of her smile.
> She was too good for this life.
> Very soon, a great transverse tear
> Left only a hand and some blue.
> Now *Fight Cancer* is there.

Socially—as I remember from the three or four times I met him (only once *tête-à-tête*)—Larkin was reserved, courteous, witty, ironically unassuming both about his poems and his librarianship. As an artist, however, he was ravenously ambitious from the start. At the age of sixteen or seventeen, he told me, he suddenly began to write "furiously" (with Virginia Woolf, of all people, as a "remote model"), though previously he had shown no particular literary inclinations. From then on he was done for. "Arrogant eternity" had him under its eye. The phrase I have just quoted is taken from a late, desperate poem, "Love Again," that was found among his papers after his death. In it he blames the intensity of his artistic ambitions for what he knew to be his manifold failures as a human being. Those ambitions were to bring him a degree of recognition that must have exceeded most, if not all, the extravagant dreams of his youth, but no one knew more bitterly than the poet himself that they had not made him a better or a more complete man. On the contrary.

> Isolate, rather, this element
>
> That spreads through other lives like a tree
> And sways them in a sort of sense
> And say why it never worked for me.
>
> Something to do with violence
> A long way back, and wrong rewards,
> And arrogant eternity.

We will never know what exactly Larkin had in mind in speaking of the "violence" and "wrong rewards" that had maimed his youth. But the demands that "arrogant eternity" made of him are another matter. Of them we remain the beneficiaries.

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Desert-island reading

by Theodore Dalrymple

Betteredge, the butler-narrator in Wilkie Collins's *Moonstone*, consults Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* much in the way that New Age spiritists consult the *I-Ching*, as a guide to future actions in difficult circumstances. The character of Betteredge, who in perplexity opens his faithful old copy of the novel at random and always finds wise advice wherever his eye falls, is a mild satire on religious fundamentalists who think that there is or ever could be a single book that answers to all human needs. He tells us:

> I am not superstitious. I have read a heap of books in my time; I am a scholar in my own way. . . . You are not to take it, please, as the saying of an ignorant man, when I express the opinion that such a book as *Robinson Crusoe* never was written, and never will be written again. I have tried that book for years . . . and have found it my friend in need in all the necessities of this mortal life.

As a child, of course, I read *Robinson Crusoe*, without forming such an excessive reverence for it. Indeed, it bored me. Oddly enough, though, the stories of shipwrecked people on tropical islands were disproportionately represented in my childhood reading. I read some of the books because everyone of my age seemed to be expected to do so. I thought that *The Swiss Family Robinson* was the most preposterous rubbish. I didn't know much, but I knew that no shipwrecked wife would address her shipwrecked husband on a desert island as follows:

> "I will spare you a description of our first day's occupations; truth to tell, I spent the time chiefly in anxious thought and watching your progress and signals. I rose very early this morning, and with utmost joy perceiving your signal that all was right, hastened to reply to it, and then while my sons yet slumbered, I sat down and began to consider how our position could be improved."

This passage (by no means untypical of the book) now reminds me of Queen Victoria's remark about Gladstone: He speaks to me as if I were a public meeting.

Another classic of the genre, R. M. Ballantyne's *Coral Island*, left me not cold, but irritated. Although I could not have put a word to the quality that grated on me, I think I now have such a word: insincerity. Of course, I had no idea then that, when it comes to the formation of literary taste, negative lessons are just as valuable in their own way as positive ones. I thought that reading good books alone was both necessary and sufficient. As for *Treasure Island*, I much preferred it to the *Coral* variety, but even then I found mere adventure stories, unallied to any purpose than to get the pulse racing, thin and unsatisfying.

I did not wonder why there were so many books concerning shipwrecks, when shipwreck was not, after all, a very common

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human experience. Much is made of man's natural curiosity, but as much might be made of his natural incuriosity: I certainly accepted a great deal of the world as I found it, without asking questions about how or why it came to be the way it was. Much later in my life, when I did indeed meet a man who had been shipwrecked, I understood (as never before) that the power of shipwreck stories was quite disproportionate to their statistical significance. He was an elderly patient for whose dignity I conceived the greatest admiration. His warship had been torpedoed in the Indian Ocean by the Japanese, and he had escaped in a lifeboat that was so overcrowded that crew members had to take it by turns to hang in the water by the lanyards. It was his best friend's turn, and noticing after about an hour that he had gone very silent, my patient started to talk to him. He was dead, however: his legs had been bitten off by a shark, but his hands still gripped the lanyards as if for grim life.

My patient complained of nightmares of this incident, which had arisen over half a century later, after he had started taking medicines for his Parkinson's disease; he woke up most nights in a cold sweat. But he had never told his wife about the incident, or the content of his nightmares, for fear of upsetting her needlessly and uselessly; she would never know of his ordeal if he could help it. I suppose such a man would now be condemned for his emotional illiteracy rather than admired for his fortitude: for it is in the nature of bad values to drive out good.

Certainly there is nothing quite like a shipwreck to reveal, if not quite a man's character, at least the depth of his character. And not just a man, but the whole of mankind: which is why *The Tempest* is Shakespeare's most direct examination of human nature.

Little did I realize as I read my desert-island literature as a child (how could I have done so?) that I should one day spend more than three years of my life on what would count as desert islands, though far from deserted ones. Through laziness, I learnt less there than I should have done about human nature, but it did at least cure me of the illusion—by then residual in any case—that somewhere on earth there existed an idyllic place where human life was without care or anxiety. The culture of the people was more or less neolithic, give or take a case of Australian beer; the environment in which they lived (a coral atoll whose land surface doubled when the tide went out) was, if limited, a naturally generous one, equable in climate, immune to natural disaster, and abundant in all the necessaries of human existence. Yet the monotony, the impossibility of escape to anywhere else, the inevitable social proximity of other human beings in so narrow a world, created its own tensions; and the predominant art form of the islands, the dance, though (or perhaps because) it was not exuberant, was of an intensity that I have rarely seen equalled. A wealth of emotion was contained in the slightest movement of the eye or the hand; hysteria was only just kept at bay.

For all my early incuriosity as to the reasons for the existence of such a genre, two desert-island works had a deep effect upon me in my youth, that I can still feel quite strongly. They are not necessarily the most important or best examples of the genre—in fact, one of them most definitely is not—but the effects of works of literature are not always proportional to their merits.

The second, and lesser work, was *The Admirable Crichton*, by J. M. Barrie (the author of *Peter Pan*). One of the reasons it had such a powerful effect on me was that I was deputed to play the lead role, that of Crichton himself. I was anxious then to strut and fret my hour upon the stage, though I could hardly disguise from myself that I had no aptitude for acting, at least in public. Of course, doctors need to be able to act—that is to say, to put on a performance—in private, in order to convey a confidence that they by no means feel. My latest triumph on the stage of the consulting room was with a Chinese prisoner, an illegal

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immigrant who, while mad, had killed a fellow Chinese—unfortunately for him the son of a Communist Party official. Cured of his madness in prison by taking the right medicine, he was now terrified that he would be deported back to China, where he would be tried again for murder (refinements such as the rule against double jeopardy not being observed there) and summarily shot. I assured him, with an assurance I did not feel, that he would not be deported: an instance, surely, when it was not merely morally permissible to lie as convincingly as possible, but morally obligatory to do so.

Crichton in the eponymous play is Lord Loam's faithful, trustworthy, and preternaturally tactful butler, who sees everything and remarks upon nothing. In the first act, we see him in his "natural" environment, Lord Loam's grand London house. Lord Loam has three daughters, who are spoilt not so much rotten as vicious; one of them, the aggressive Lady Mary, is to be engaged to Lord Brocklehurst, a conventionally nincompoopish aristocrat totally under the thumb of his Lady Bracknell-type mother; and another, Lady Agatha, is to be engaged to Ernest Woolley, the younger son of an aristocrat and nephew of Lord Loam who fancies himself, quite mistakenly, an aphorist. When Lady Mary asks the butler Crichton why he smiled when Ernest addressed one of his damp aphorisms ("I'm not young enough to know everything") to him Crichton replies, "My lady, he is the second son of a peer." Lady Mary replies, "Very proper sentiments. You are a good soul, Crichton." Virtue consists of acceptance of the place in the social hierarchy into which one is born.

Lord Loam is a peer of advanced social views. Although a hereditary member of the House of Lords, he believes that all men are created equal, and therefore once a month holds a tea party for the servants in which their erstwhile masters and mistresses attempt to serve them and make polite conversation with them. Needless to say, the whole event is excruciatingly embarrassing for all concerned.

At the end of the first act, we learn that Lord Loam, his daughters and Ernest, together with a clergyman, are to take a cruise in Lord Loam's yacht. Crichton is persuded to go along as well.

At the opening of Act II, the yacht has just been wrecked in a storm, and the passengers (no crew) are cast adrift on a deserted island. Crichton is revealed as the survivor with not only the most practical skills, but also the natural authority proper to the circumstances. He is not yet the complete master of all he surveys, but on the way to becoming that master. He tells Ernest that every time he utters an epigram, his head will be ducked in a bucket. At first, the upper-class castaways revolt against his authority, and go off to form a band of their own, but as Crichton is the only one who knows how to produce food, we see them at the end of the act slinking back to him in order to be fed.

This scene always now brings to my mind the story of an eminent British economist, who was driving with some friends on the motorway, lamenting during the whole journey the complete incompetence, fecklessness, and laziness of the British working class, when the tire of his car burst. He and his friends had no idea how to change a tire; they were rescued from their predicament by a member of that very class whom moments before the economist had been denigrating as perfectly useless.

By the third act of the play, two years later, Crichton has emerged as the natural leader of the castaways; his abilities are so great that he manages not only to construct a comfortable home, but a hydroelectric system. At the touch of a button, beacons will be lit if a ship hoves into view that might rescue them. Crichton is now so much the boss (called "the Gov." by all the others) that he lives apart from them, who serve him hand and foot. The three sisters squabble for the privilege of waiting on him at table, while the men are delighted if he commends them in any way. Lord Loam is now called by the insulting sobriquet

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Daddy. Lady Mary—known by the vulgar diminutive Polly—is extremely flattered when Crichton proposes to her. Crichton is just about to give way to regal folie de grandeur (he has a special cloak which he dons) when a ship appears on the horizon. Though he knows that rescue will deprive him of his new-found authority, Crichton "plays the game" and lights the beacon. As soon as a rescuer arrives, Daddy becomes Lord Loam again, and no longer calls Crichton "the Gov." but plain Crichton.

In the final act, they are back in London, and Crichton is the butler once more. Ernest has written a book about their time on the island, portraying himself as the hero and leader, not mentioning Crichton. There is an awkward scene in which Lady Brocklehurst suspects that her future daughter-in-law, Lady Mary, may not have been entirely faithful to her son while on the island, but Crichton, ever tactful, and never telling all that he knows, saves the day. Then, to the great relief of the family, he announces that he will soon be leaving service. The last conversation of the play takes place between Crichton and Lady Mary:

> Lady Mary: You are the best man among us.
> Crichton: On an island, perhaps; but in England, no.
> Lady Mary: Then there is something wrong with England.
> Crichton: My lady, not even from you can I listen to a word against England.

Playing Crichton had three effects upon me. The first was that it gave me a physical gesture to which, more than forty years later, I sometimes still return, despite myself. When the rescue takes place, Crichton resumes "the humble bearing of a servant" and "his hands come together as if he were washing them": and despite the fact that this was a gesture that I had never made until I played Crichton (and that I did so for only three performances), sometimes, in difficult situations in which I wish to display humility, I find my hands come together as if I were washing them. I am at a loss to explain the lasting effect of so trivial and fleeting a thespian experience upon me.

It is clear that Sir James Barrie's play, which is in many respects merely silly and brittle, is open to a politically radical interpretation. He was, after all, a man of humble origin himself, before achieving great wealth and world fame. He must have felt that, had the cards been dealt equally at birth (except those relating to natural ability), the social hierarchy of the country, indeed of the world, would have looked very different from how it did look. And certainly, acting Crichton gave to me an abiding self-confidence to judge that the social position of a person did not necessarily reflect his underlying worth, that I should have to make a judgment of my own; and furthermore, that my own worth was not dependent upon the place in the social hierarchy to which the world assigned me. Playing a humble servant who became a master and then a humble servant again (though still much the best man present) gave me a belief in myself, perhaps too strongly, that I have never lost.

And finally, the scene in which Crichton dons a regal cloak, and then has to let it fall from his shoulders when the rescue takes place, has served as a permanent warning to me that all success, all ascendency, is temporary and fragile, and that humiliation is always lurking just around the corner.

This minor, indeed mediocre, work of literature, then, that I do not even particularly admire, had an effect upon me out of all proportion to its merits: possibly stronger than any other work with which I was or was to become familiar, except one, which was also set upon a desert island.

That work was *Lord of the Flies*, by William Golding. The book was the first novel that caused me to reflect for longer than I read, perhaps because I read it under the direction of a teacher who was also the first in my experience ever to expect anything of me other than regurgitation or the simplest mathematical operations. He was the first self-con-

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sciously intellectual person I had ever met, at least who took an interest in me, and I therefore considered him the acme of genius. He went on to become a university professor of literature, now emeritus. There was a time when I should have considered that as the acme of achievement.

Golding, who had been a naval officer during the war and had seen, indeed volunteered for, quite a lot of action, wrote the book because of the puzzle of evil. Where did it come from? We post-war boys knew perfectly well—it came from them, the enemy, the Germans, those who bombed London—but this was an answer that did not satisfy Golding. He had not only been a naval officer, he had been a schoolmaster, and knew boys. In the book, it is precisely Jack, the boy who leads the rest of the marooned children into the paths of unthinking evil, who says near the beginning of the book, "We're English; and the English are best at everything. So we've got to do the right things." He ends up as a tiny Hitler. So it could happen here after all.

A party of English schoolchildren are marooned without adults on a coral island. The aircraft in which they were being evacuated from a nuclear war (the proof that evil is well-established or ineradicable among adults) either crashed or was shot down. Ralph, an attractive boy with fair hair and physical grace, is elected leader, in part because he has found the conch that calls the children to order and that becomes a symbol of democracy among them: whoever is holding it has the right to speak. Piggy is first his acolyte and then his guide: fat, shortsighted, suffering from asthma, he is also his social inferior, as demonstrated by his grammatical solecisms (he says "them" for "those").

But unlike Ralph, he is capable of independent thought. Jack is the leader of the choirboys, who at the beginning of the book still have a distinctive uniform; he never accepts Ralph's leadership, rejects the *symbolism of the conch*, and in the end wrests the leadership away from Ralph, leading the choir and "the littluns" (the children too young to have individual characters) to the utmost savagery. Were it not for the intervention of a British naval officer, landing from a warship, at the very end of the book, Ralph would have been killed by Jack and his tribe of followers, who set fire to the entire island in order to flush Ralph out. This is a perfect replay of the German *Götterdamerrung* ordered by Hitler: but the rescue by the naval officer is no solution to the problem of evil, since he himself represents the very forces that are making the nuclear war from which the children had to be evacuated in the first place.

Ralph and Piggy, though temperamentally very different and of two social classes, represent rationality and the rule of law. They want to act sensibly and responsibly; to build shelters against the rain, to light a fire and keep it going so that the smoke might attract rescuers. But Jack wants to hunt, and turns his choirboys into hunters; and in the end the dionysiac excitement of the hunters' life, with its bloody rituals and savage dances, comes to dominate, both by means of its intrinsic attractions and its ruthless imposition of conformity, leaving Ralph and Piggy isolated.

Jack and his hunters also offer the littluns protection against the "beastie," the imaginary creature they believe inhabits the island's jungle, that will come to destroy them in the night, in whose existence the older boys half-believe themselves. But there is no beastie, though an attempt to ward it off by erecting the head of a hunted pig on a pole acts to reinforce the belief in its reality.

Thus a band of British boys, when left to their own devices on an isolated tropical island (which, as Ralph points out at the beginning of the book, is a perfectly good island, because it has everything the children need to live comfortably—a Garden of Eden in fact) create a polity not very different from the Nazi one: obsessed with imaginary enemies, they invest a leader with total power, they suppress freedom, per-

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secute dissenters and ruthlessly impose barbaric rituals. The last two to join Jack's savage tribe, the twins, Samneric (Sam and Eric), explain why they deserted the liberal-democratic Ralph and Piggy:

> "—they made us—"
> "—we couldn't help it—"

Precisely the argument of millions of ordinary Germans.

The book taught me a shocking lesson that I never entirely forgot, and that has been reinforced by my experience as a doctor in an English slum: that evil does not have to be introduced into the heart of man from without, it is always lurking within, awaiting its opportunity to take over, and we are never safe from its predations. There is evil within me, not because I am special, or specially bad, but because I am a human. The price of decency, one's own and everyone else's, is therefore eternal vigilance. The games we played—good us, bad them—were not true to reality. And in a brilliant moment, Golding captures the fragility of goodness, of the predictable, ordered social existence that I, like all my friends, led. At one of the assemblies, a "littlun," Percival, is pushed forward to speak by the other littluns.

> Piggy knelt, holding the conch.
> "Now then. What's your name?"
> The small boy twisted away. . . . Piggy turned helplessly to Ralph.
> "What's your name?"
> Tormented by the silence and the refusal the assembly broke into a chant.
> "What's your name? What's your name?"
> "Quiet!"
> Ralph peered at the child in the twilight. "Now tell us. What's your name?"
> "Percival Wemys Madison, The Vicarage, Harcourt St. Anthony, Hants, telephone, telephone, tele—"

Not only are we made aware in this passage of the cruelty of boys, who have no sympathy or empathy whatever for one of their own number, but the invocation, by a boy with an upper-class name, of an address suggestive of the safest, gentlest, most sheltered and prosperous way of life imaginable, is useless to ward off his terror. He then whispers that the beastie comes from the sea. Harcourt St. Anthony: geraniums, hollyhocks, thatched cottages, church bazaars, strawberries and cream for tea. But Percival Wemys Madison, so sheltered that he is unaware even of the social connotations of his name, ends up among the murderous savages led by Jack. The past can be destroyed.

Lord of the Flies, the first novel I ever thought seriously about, taught me that, because there is savagery in all of us, civilization is a thin and fragile veneer. I did not conclude from this that therefore civilization is bogus, for thin as its veneer might be, it is the only thing that protects us from barbarism; rather, its fragility means that it ought to be cherished and defended, while those who claim to despise it on account of its fragility do so either because they do not know how much they rely upon it, or because they are tired of always being civilized and want to revert to savagery.

The boy in the book with whom I had most sympathy was Piggy. Originally, this was because he was an outsider, an apparent failure, despised by everyone, as vulnerable as a hermit crab without its shell. It was how I felt at the time. His death at the hand of Jack's band of savages, who killed him because he was a moral reproach to them, was a terrible one, memorably described. He and Ralph go to confront Jack's tribe, who have stolen his spectacles to make fire with, and without whose one remaining lens he can hardly see at all. The tribe are ensconced in a natural fort, protected by a large boulder that can be rolled down on anyone who approaches it.

> Ralph heard the great rock long before he saw it. He was aware of a jolt in the earth. . . . Then the monstrous red thing bounded across the neck and he flung himself flat while the tribe shrieked.

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> The rock struck Piggy a glancing blow from chin to knee; the conch [he was holding, the symbol of law and democracy,] exploded into a thousand white fragments and ceased to exist. Piggy, saying nothing, with no time even for a grunt, travelled through the air sideways from the rock, turning over as he went. The rock bounded twice and was lost in the forest. Piggy fell forty feet and landed on his back across that square, red rock in the sea. His head opened and stuff came out and turned red. Piggy's arms and legs twitched a bit, like a pig's after it has been killed. Then the sea breathed again in a long slow sigh, the water boiled white and pink over the rock; and when it went, sucking back again, the body of Piggy was gone.

Death is unjust; death is unmerited; death is sudden; above all death is real and final; and yet one has to cope with it, to continue despite its dominion. That is what the passage taught me, a lesson reinforced by the death of a friend three years after I read *Lord of the Flies*. Piggy's death connected in my mind with his, and the pity of the two deaths coalesced.

Like Piggy my friend was shortsighted (I remember his blindness without spectacles, and the prominent, presbyopian bulge of his eyes); like Piggy he was asthmatic and couldn't run or play games. Like Piggy he was clever.

One day I went to his home after I had been away for two weeks. His mother answered the door.

"Haven't you heard? Michael died last week."

I thought of Piggy. In fact, though, my friend had died of his inability to breathe, and his heart gave out. The ambulance refused to come until the controller confirmed with the family doctor that the patient really had asthma, and he died shortly before it arrived. His death was not unconnected to human failing, the sadistic pleasure of the ambulance controller in his own punctilio. My friend's last words to his mother were, "I'm dying, I'm dying, can't you see that I'm dying."

Then his mother, a widow, said something terrible to me in the bitterness of her grief, and I never went back to see her as I think I should. She had another son who, unlike Michael, wasn't clever; he was a ne'er-do-well.

"Why couldn't he have died instead?"

I fled. What if my brother died, would my mother say the same thing? I was terrified. How complex, how difficult life was! Literature was the search for the sense of it. And desert island stories were my first intimation of its power. It could explain even where it could not change: though I think it changed me.

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Alfred Duggan's past

by John Derbyshire

It is no use making any large claims for historical fiction. As is the case with science fiction, the historical genre certainly has its masterpieces. Yet with few exceptions—*Henry Esmond*, perhaps, *War and Peace*, and one or two others—even these masterpieces are understood to dwell in a realm separate from the main body of literary endeavor. It does not help that the lowest and most popular kind of historical novel is nowadays widely known by a rather demeaning sobriquet, one that escaped from the back rooms of publishing houses into general circulation around 1980: "bodice-ripper." It is hard to take a novel seriously when, on picking it up, you have that expression in the back of your mind.

Historical fiction is, in fact, in somewhat the same relation to mainstream fiction as opera is to instrumental music. There are some very high-minded music lovers who will not go to see an opera—and even some conductors who will not take on operatic productions. While many great composers have tried their hands at opera, only Mozart and Handel really made a convincing success of it. Haydn wrote twenty-two operas, according to *Grove*, but I think only *Armida* is much performed nowadays, and that not often. Just so with great novelists and historical fiction—*Salammbô*, anyone? Contrariwise, many composers of numerous enduringly successful operas created little of any other kind of work. Donizetti composed some chamber music in his youth, but you will have to hunt around very diligently to find it in live performance.

Alfred Duggan was a sort of Donizetti of historical fiction. He might have been as prolific as the great Bergamasc, too, but for the facts that he started late and died before his time. In the fifteen years from 1950 to 1964, Duggan published fifteen historical novels, precisely one *per annum*. He died in that latter year aged not quite sixty-one. His writing career thus spanned that portion of life when most of us are looking forward to retirement. Duggan wrote no other fiction, and only a handful of nonfiction books aimed mainly at children and teens, dealing with historical topics that can, in any case, mostly be found well presented in the novels.

Here is a list of Duggan's novels, in order of publication, with a very brief pointer to the historical period of each. Some of them were given different titles for U.S. publication. I shall use the original, British titles here and in all that follows: *Knight with Armour* (the First Crusade); *Conscience of the King* (the beginnings of Saxon England); *The Little Emperors* (the end of Roman Britain); *The Lady for Ransom* (eleventh-century Normans in Byzantine service); *Leopards and Lilies* (early thirteenth-century England); *God and My Right* (St. Thomas à Becket); *Winter Quarters* (Rome under the First Triumvirate); *Three's Company* (Rome under the Second Triumvirate); *Founding Fathers* (the founding of Rome); *Family*

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Favourites (the reign of Elagabalus); *The Cunning of the Dove* (Edward the Confessor); *The King of Athelney* (Alfred the Great); *Lord Geoffrey's Fancy* (thirteenth-century Frankish Greece); *Elephants and Castles* (the successors to Alexander the Great), and *Count Bohemond* (the First Crusade again).

It can be seen that Duggan's stories cover a good historical range, from the eighth century B.C. to about A.D. 1280. The Normans and Franks of the latter part of that range were of particular interest to him (six novels), with Romans (five) a close second, and Saxons (three) and Macedonians (one) filling out the remainder.

Duggan himself said that he chose obscure periods for his novels in order to minimize the need for research. This was false modesty. It is plain from his books that Duggan knew a very great deal about ancient and medieval military history, and about the everyday customs of people in past times. Even if Duggan had any aversion to research himself, he was, in at least one instance, glad to use the researches of others. *Elephants and Castles* is built around notes bequeathed to him by the American historian Lee Byrne, who had been studying the book's main character, Demetrius Poliorcetes, for many years with the intention of writing a novel, but had died before he was ready to begin.

Duggan's self-deprecating remark does find an odd echo in the quality of his books. It is the case, broadly speaking, that the best-researched of Duggan's books are the least fun to read. This calls for some explanation.

There are two quite distinct kinds of historical novel, which I shall call the "hard" and the "soft." On the one hand, the writer of historical fiction may attempt to capture the inner life and motivations of some real and well-documented historical figure. Robert Graves's *Claudius* novels offer outstanding examples of this "hard" sub-genre. On the other hand, our author might center his story on some invented person, who is let loose amidst historical scenery: think of *Gone with the Wind* or Patrick O'Brian's sea stories. (As a slight variant of this "soft" sub-genre, the same thing can be done with a historical figure sufficiently obscure he might as well be an invention.)

The "hard" sub-genre is less often attempted because it is much more difficult to pull off. To give a convincing account of the thoughts and emotions of, say, Charlemagne, you need to do a great deal of research into the man, his family, friends, and colleagues. You also need a good understanding of human types, an imaginative appreciation of people who may be quite unlike yourself. This combination of diligence and insight is not often found among fiction writers, who tend if anything to be more lazy and self-obsessed than the human average. "Soft" historical fiction, however, can be tackled by anybody, including the kind of novelist whose central characters are really nothing more than self-impersonations. It is, in fact, rather amusing to imagine oneself wandering around in old Carthage or fighting at Manzikert. Probably anyone who has contemplated fiction writing at all has had the urge to write a book of this sort, and it is plain from the proliferation of low-grade "bodice-rippers" that lots of people want to read such books.

Duggan took on both sub-genres. Of his fifteen novels, I would characterize seven as "hard," the personalities drawn being St. Thomas à Becket, Marcus Aemilius Lepidus, the emperor Elagabalus, Edward the Confessor, Alfred the Great, the aforementioned Demetrius Poliorcetes, and Bohemond I of Antioch. I do not think it is unkind to say, though, that Duggan was at his best in the "soft" style. His invented main characters, or those actual historical figures like Cerdic and Roussel de Balliol who are so obscure they might as well be invented, are on the whole more successful than his recreations of known personalities.

This can be seen rather clearly by comparing Duggan's first and last novels. As it happens, both books cover much the same historical and geographical territory. *Knight with Armour* tells the story of Roger of

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Bodeham, younger son of an Anglo-Norman knight. So far as I know, Roger is an invented character. There is no significant historical person of that name. Roger, having no hope of inheriting his father's manor, goes off on the First Crusade in the train of Robert, Duke of Normandy. Duggan gives a vivid account of that tremendous enterprise, seen through the eyes of a minor and rather naïve participant.

Count Bohemond uses the same historical background for a quite different story, centered on the character and deeds of Bohemond I. This involves us in the convoluted politics of the Crusade—the constant squabbling among the leaders, and the intrigues of the Byzantine Emperor. Bohemond, unlike Roger de Bodeham, is an experienced warrior, so that war seen through his eyes reads like the dry chronicle of some military historian. Compare, for example, the account of the Battle of Dorylaeum in Chapter 7 of *Bohemond* with the description of the same events in Chapter 3 of *Knight*. From the first: "Little groups of knights had disobeyed orders and tried to chase away their assailants. That always led to disaster . . ." From the second: "Hugh pulled his horse out of the ranks and galloped diagonally to the left. . . . Roger and eight of his immediate neighbours followed him. Instantly the Turkish line on the hill was in motion . . ." In the first, we have a dry overview; in the second, the intimate personal witness of a youngster experiencing his first battle.

I don't mean to imply that all Duggan's "hard" characters are failures. Bohemond is a stuffed shirt—a mail shirt, of course—and Duggan's Thomas à Becket left me cold, his Edward the Confessor only a little warmer. (Though at least Duggan spares us the "gay" Edward of current imagining—in Julian Rathbone's *The Last English King*, for example. Duggan speaks frankly about adult matters, but his books are free of salacity and profanity, and I recommend them to intelligent young-teen readers of the present day.) These are low points, though. When Duggan succeeds in giving us a major historical figure, he succeeds brilliantly.

Most successful of all Duggan's "hard" fiction, in my opinion, is *Three's Company*, the story of Marcus Aemilius Lepidus, who was the third man in the Second Triumvirate that followed the death of Julius Caesar (the other members being Antony and Octavian). Of this person, the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* says: "Lepidus lacked the character and energy to use the opportunities which high birth and Caesar's favour placed in his way." Taking this as his key, Duggan delivers a devastating and often hilarious portrait of a man who, while intelligent, level-headed, brave, and dutiful, nurses an image of himself and his possibilities drastically at odds with his actual qualities. The book's only drawback is that it assumes more understanding of the very complicated constitution of republican Rome than a modern reader is likely to have. An ideal edition would have explanatory appendices like those very helpful ones included in Colleen McCullough's "Masters of Rome" novels, to help us distinguish among aediles, praetors, quaestors, and so on.

Three's Company employs a successful "framing device": a brief running commentary on events appended to each chapter, in the very Waughian voice of one Lady Clodia, usually speaking from her dressing-table or bed of lust. Though plainly no fan of Modernist experimentalism, Duggan was not averse to departures from plain narrative, and deployed the full range of traditional novelist's tools to engage and hold the reader's attention. Last-minute surprises? Do *not* peek forward at the final pages of *Leopards and Lilies*.

It is in the "soft" sub-genre of historical fiction that Duggan truly excels, though. This becomes plain if you ask a Duggan fan to name his favorite of the fifteen books. My own admittedly very small sample yielded two votes for *Conscience of the King* and one each for *Leopards and Lilies*, *Founding Fathers*, *The Little Emperors*, and *Lord Geoffrey's Fancy*—all "soft" fictions. Two of these books deal with actual persons, though such obscure ones that Duggan can make free with their personalities.

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Conscience of the King purports to be an autobiographical memoir of Cerdic, First king of Wessex, about whom little more is known but that he died in A.D. 534 after establishing the first Saxon kingdom on the ruins of Roman Britain. Cerdic is claimed as ultimate ancestor of all subsequent British monarchs, including the current one, though these claims depend on some genealogical sleight of hand by the later Saxons. He presents a puzzle to historians, his name being of obviously British (that is, Romano-Celtic) origins. As a king of the Saxons, he therefore appears to be playing for the wrong team. Duggan squares this circle by giving Cerdic a mixed Roman, German, and British ancestry, and turns him into an amoral survivor, a sort of Dark Ages Harry Flashman, who manages to dispose of, or arrange for the disposal of, or fail to avert the disposal of—regretfully in every case—all those who get in his way, notably his wife, his brother, and his father.

Duggan's life was sufficiently colorful to make a novel by itself. He was born Alfred Leo Duggan in Buenos Aires in 1903. His father, Alfredo Hubert Duggan, was a third-generation Argentinian of Irish ancestry. The family were wealthy landowners; at the time of his death, Alfredo's father —that is, Alfred's grandfather—possessed eighteen large *estancias*. Alfred's mother was Grace Elvina Hinds, of the Hinds mansion in Decatur, Alabama, to where her father, J. Monroe Hinds, had moved after distinguished service in the Union cause during the Civil War. Hinds *père* entered the U.S. diplomatic service in the 1870s, eventually becoming U.S. Consul General in Rio de Janeiro. Grace was a terrific beauty, who even (by her own account, at any rate) managed to turn the head of the asexual Lord Kitchener.

In 1905 Alfred's father was appointed "honorary attaché" at the Argentine Legation in London. I have not been able to discover what diplomatic duties this entailed, other than vigorous socializing; I suspect the answer is "none." The family moved to England, and Alfred's subsequent history is entirely English. As English as it could be, in fact: his father died in 1915 (of drink, according to his sons), and his mother then married George Nathaniel Curzon, the epitome of the born-to-rule Imperial-British aristocrat—he had served as Viceroy of India, 1898–1905, and spent his entire adult life in the highest political and aristocratic circles. Little Alfred and his younger brother Hubert were educated at Eton, while Grace ended her days as the Marchioness Curzon of Kedleston, publishing, in 1955, a rather vaporous memoir of her life.

It is as an Etonian that Duggan makes his first appearance in literature, in the first volume of Anthony Powell's autobiography. Alfred himself was somewhat senior to Powell, who was better acquainted with Hubert, on whom he based the character of Charles Stringham in *A Dance to the Music of Time*. Powell does tell the story of Alfred's expulsion from Eton, which followed upon the discovery that he had been sneaking out to spend nights with a girl in the town.

From Eton Alfred went to Balliol College, Oxford. The writer Peter Quennell gave a memorable portrait of him there.

> Alfred Duggan . . . was a dashing Restoration rake, who, having at length been converted to Catholicism, developed into a successful and prolific historical novelist. At Oxford, Alfred "was very rich. . . . He was, moreover, the stepson of the Chancellor of the University, Lord Curzon. This connection irked the authorities, who otherwise would have summarily sent him down. We were often drunk, Alfred almost always." And not only did he keep a string of hunters, but every night of his life, wearing full evening dress, he would have himself driven off to London, and there spend the next three or four hours at a then-notorious Soho nightclub. Driven back again, he would scale the façade of the college and struggle through his first-floor [i.e. American "second-floor"] window. The bribes that he paid his scout, I remember him telling me, ran into several hundred pounds a year. But, drunk or sober, he was always polite and impassive; and his

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> starched shirt-front, with its lustrous pearl studs, seldom showed a crease or dent.

The quote that begins in that second sentence is from Evelyn Waugh, another Oxford acquaintance of Alfred's. Waugh's date of birth was midway between those of the two Duggan brothers, and Waugh knew them both very well. He was actually present at Hubert's death, wrote memorably about it in both his *Letters* and *Diaries*, and based the deathbed scene in *Brideshead Revisited* on it. When Alfred died in 1964, Waugh wrote a fine, moving obituary for the *Spectator*, reproduced in *The Essays, Articles, and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh*, and as a preface to the posthumously published *Count Bohemond*. In the obituary, Waugh declares his own favorite among Duggan's novels to be *Conscience of the King*—not a bad choice, and one which I included in my little poll up above. Notes Waugh: "Romans and Normans, the worlds of empire and chivalry, were the natural founts of his imagination. Modern history he regarded with calm despair."

When Lord Curzon died in 1925, he left his entire fortune to Grace, Alfred's mother. It did not last long. Grace was, in the delicate words of Lord Curzon's most recent biographer, "unencumbered by intellectual interests," and seems not to have grasped the most elementary principles of money management. She was also unwise in her choice of companionship post-Curzon, taking as her lover Sir Matthew "Scatters" Wilson, a bounder in the grand English "bad baronet" tradition, and a confident but unreliable judge of both horseflesh and business ventures. By 1931 Grace was flat broke, and the affair with Sir Matthew had disintegrated. She moved in with Alfred, who had inherited some money from his father, and continued to live with him until his marriage in 1953.

The last ten of those years were spent at Bodiam Manor in East Sussex, from where Grace's bedroom window looked out at fourteenth-century Bodiam Castle. Lord Curzon, who was, amongst an awe-inspiring number of other things, a keen antiquary, had bought the ruined castle (with the manor as an afterthought) in 1916 in order to restore it. There had been a manor house, of course, long before there was a castle; and it was from the imagined Norman manor house that Roger de Bodeham rides forth in *Knight with Armour*. In her autobiography, in fact, Grace speaks thus of Lord Curzon's feelings towards Bodiam Castle: "He felt that it brought back the Age of Chivalry to him, and he almost expected to see knights in armour, or trains of long-robed ladies on their palfreys carrying falcons on their wrists, coming out of the great gate of the Castle."

Alfred's youthful addictions to booze, gambling, and loose women had come to a head early in 1924, when his stepfather decreed that no further bills would be honored with Curzon money except those due to tradesmen or debts of honor: "The Randolph Hotel, the tarts, and the night club will not be paid." It was decided to see what travel would do for the young man. A job was arranged with London's Natural History Museum, on whose behalf Duggan sailed across the Atlantic in a 600-foot barquentine, collecting specimens from the West Indies and Galapagos Islands. Much of the following fourteen years was spent in travel and archeological explorations, mainly in the Eastern Mediterranean. Thus it was that Duggan acquired the great stock of geographical and historical knowledge that he later deployed so effortlessly in his novels. Strangely, though, the city of Antioch, which features in no less than six of those novels, and for which Duggan plainly nursed a fascination, was one he never visited.

In 1938, apparently anticipating World War II, Duggan joined the Territorial Army (roughly equivalent to the U.S. National Guard), and saw strenuous active service in the Norway debacle of 1940. Discharged as medically unfit, Duggan spent the remainder of the war working in an airplane factory. In later years, his inheritance gone, Duggan adjusted philosophically to his changed circumstances, living a bookish and domestic life utterly at odds with the extravagant dis-

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sipation of his youth. He seems to have been a devoted husband and parent, and a loyal friend. Waugh attributes the change principally to supernatural grace, and I suppose this explanation is as good as any, though there is little overt piety in the novels, other than what is required for medieval scene-setting. Duggan's characters are a worldly lot—even the saints. Whatever the quality of his faith, he did not impose it on his fictions.

From Anthony Powell's memoirs:

> In 1950, when I was editing the novel-review pages of *The Times Literary Supplement*, a publisher asked that a first novel by an unknown writer should not be overlooked on the grounds of belonging to an obsolescent genre of literature. The author was called "Alfred Duggan." I remarked how strange that I should have known someone of that name; the last man on earth to attempt a historical novel.

One can understand a person in postwar England thinking that he had seen quite enough history for a while, but obviously this publisher was in error. Probably there will always be a receptive readership for good historical fiction, though probably, as with opera, there will always be lovers of literature who just don't see the point.

What *is* the point? Science fiction fans like to speak of the "sense of wonder." Kingsley Amis, for instance, said that the purpose of science fiction is "to arouse wonder, terror and excitement." Some similar sense is stimulated by good historical fiction. *To think that this person actually lived!* (Or, in the case of the "soft" style: *To think that some such person probably lived!*) Everyone who has reached middle age has a sense of the remoteness and strangeness of life even a scant few decades ago: children in iron lungs; drama on the radio; having your feet X-rayed in the shoe store; people smoking cigarettes all the time, everywhere. How much odder things were a century before that! And a millennium? Two millennia? Even to try to imagine such worlds one needs help. Historical fiction supplies that help.

Yet ultimately historical fiction is, like all art, an illusion. Here are people just like us: same facial features, same limbs, their desires and hates arising from the same springs as ours. And yet their actions were often bizarrely, fathomlessly inexplicable to us. When the clergy of Seez filled an episcopal vacancy without consulting their lay lord, Geoffrey of Anjou, he had the lot of them castrated—the bishop-elect, too. An earlier Count of Anjou, Fulk the Black, in penance for his sins, voluntarily shuffled to Jerusalem and back *three times*—total 15,000 miles, much of it trackless mountain and forest—while shackled in irons. What on earth were they thinking? We cannot know. By the narration of such things, though, a skillful writer can rouse us to wonder and awe.

In *Lord Geoffrey's Fancy* Duggan introduces us to thirteenth-century Greece under the rule of Frankish knights. The geography and ethnography of that place are refracted through the language and sensibility of these knights. Athens is "Satines"; Corinth is "Chorinte"; the natives are "Grifons" (Greeks) or "Esclavons" (South Slavs). The effect is to render the whole story as taking place in a completely imagined world, a Tolkeinian fantasy without the magic, yet the history is sound and well researched. At the end of the book, the narrator, returned to England, laments the passing of it all:

> But I have seen it: the colours of western blazonry burning under the bright sun, castles of shimmering white marble, the Latin chant in the Cathedral of Our Lady of Satines, columns erected by the wise men of old and the soaring domes of the cunning Grifons. That life will never come again. It ought to be remembered.

Yes, it ought to be remembered—not just by archeologists and antiquaries, but by ordinary thoughtful men and women, seeking relief from the press of daily affairs in the productions of a gifted, informed imagination. There have been few historical imaginations better informed or more gifted than Alfred Duggan's.

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New poems
by Elizabeth Spires, Samuel Menashe & Ben Downing

Sunday morning at the Carmelite monastery

My breath,
on this January morning,
a small white cloud

as, shivering, I step
into a room of light.
There, on the bare table,

the plate of bread, the cup.
I have come to sit quietly.
To be filled up.

Advent is passed,
the old Nativity
both mystery and fact.

We felt its approach,
peered, like curious children,
into the bright cave

where the miracle happened.
And now winter, the pilgrim
soul tracking deeper

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into snow, unsure of where
it wants to go. Prayers,
for those who pray,

fly silently up to
the vaulted ceiling.
Some, the lucky ones,

pass through, while others
must idly stay and stay.
My thoughts adrift,

I am pulled back
to this moment by a voice
not my own saying,

Today is the first day of ordinary time . . .

—*Elizabeth Spires*

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Due soldi di speranza

I leave two pennies
On my table
To keep hope in sight

I enable myself
By any device
An angel would recognize

Even if he came
While I was away
A good sign
Might make him stay

—*Samuel Menashe*

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Kiblah

—from Arabic *qiblah*, "that which is placed opposite" (*OED*)

To Muslims it means a number of things:
the point toward which they turn in prayer
(Mecca now but once Jerusalem);
that side of a mosque thus oriented;
the sacred direction itself.

To me, impiously adopting it,
the word denotes quite simply you:
the one toward whom, whenever love's azan
comes floating to my fervent ear,
I pivot, kneel, and address my orison.

—Ben Downing

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Theater

Thin on the ground

by Mark Steyn

I divide my time, as the book jackets put it, between Quebec and New Hampshire, and, though they border each other, if one were tossed out of a low-flying Piper Twin Cub one would have no doubt which side of the line one had landed on. When you cross from the south, you're greeted by a sign on the autoroute declaring "SIGNALISATION METRIQUE" followed by "65" with a line scored through it and underneath "100." I often think, crossing from the north, that they should have a sign on the New Hampshire side displaying a conventionally proportioned woman with a line scored through her and underneath a humongous North Country gal.

I hasten to add I don't mean that in a disparaging way. Over my years in the Granite State, I've grown accustomed to their bulk, and come to find many of them rather beautiful: their size seems to suit the rigors of rural life, and certainly when it's 40 below at night you want something that will give off a little heat, not some emaciated curly-endive nibbler from the Upper West Side. But there's no denying the fact that everyone around is very large. Even the small women are large, as I notice from time to time when I bump into one of my more petite New Hampshire neighbors on a shopping expedition in Montreal. Gassing up at the general store in the White Mountains, they seem comparatively cadaverous. Walking down the boulevard de Maisonneuve, they're suddenly the largest thing in view.

Increasingly, the increasing size of the natives is the only aspect of American life in which the rest of the world is interested. At dinner parties in London and Paris, they'll warm up over the hors d'oeuvres with a little perfunctory Bush-bashing but the vast bulk of the evening will be devoted to the vast bulk of Americans, with many competitive anecdotes about the largest American they've ever seen. British TV networks seem to do an inordinate amount of documentaries about fat Americans. I use the term "documentary" loosely: it mostly involves just plunking a camera down in the middle of Orlando or Atlantic City and then getting some Brit telly personality to add a sneering commentary.

As someone who rejoices in the ever widening differences between America and the rest of the west, I'm on the whole approving of the ever widening American waistline. So I was intrigued by the premise of the new production at the Lucille Lortel Theatre. In *Fat Pig*, the title role is a big lady called Helen. To be honest, I was a lot less intrigued when I realized the author was Neil LaBute, and I'd much rather some other playwright had got to this theme first. LaBute plays have become the theatrical equivalent of catchy pop songs. They've got hooks, and the hooks are often ingeniously catchy—before the one "about" the fat girl, there was one "about" 9/11—but once he's hooked you he doesn't really take you

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anywhere. I've seen everything he's done and they all go pretty much the same way. Even when they "shock," they do so only through sadistic manipulation rather than through any genuine revelation. The shocking moment in, say, Evelyn Waugh's *Handful of Dust* is shocking because its carelessness is the last thing you're expecting. That's why it stays with you, whereas I can hardly remember a thing about LaBute's supposedly shocking *In the Company of Men*, and that was by far the best of the bunch. Nevertheless, its shock was all in its style—he's clinical and unsparing but only about situations into which he's maneuvered his characters for the purposes of showing how clinical and unsparing he is.

I remember a couple of years back seeing *The Shape of Things*, and thinking that that title really sums up his entire approach to drama: his priority is always the shape of things, the geometry of the play, rather than character, emotion, plot, organic development. In *Fat Pig*, though the central character may have a different shape, the question is whether it will get trimmed and kneaded and massaged and stapled into just another go-round of the same old LaBute formula. He must have been delighted by the pre-publicity. In the run-up to opening, every time I switched on the radio or opened a magazine there seemed to be a featurette about LaBute finally confronting this great taboo, this vital social issue, especially for women. That's the wrong way of looking at it. I don't believe fat is an "issue" at all in most parts of America. Round about the time of the Afghan liberation, some feminists in *The Boston Globe* started banging on about how we in the west also tyrannize women through relentless media "body images" that drive women into bulimia. Really? Go to a suburban Multiplex any night of the week and you can watch Cameron Diaz or Julia Roberts on screen while surrounded by an audience whose distaff side weighs an average 280 pounds and is happily chowing down on the extra-buttery popcorn and supersized soda. Whatever oppressive messages about "body image" are being transmitted, they don't seem to be terribly effective. Fat is less of a social issue than a cultural one—that's to say, what seems unhealthy is the absence of persons of bulk from our movies, TV shows, etc. A few decades back, if you were, say, black and there were no blacks in the TV commercials, it didn't seem such a big deal, because there were no Jews, Asians, or Hispanics either. But when every single 30 seconds of airtime is cast like an affirmative-action program with representatives of every visible minority, the exclusion of America's invisible majority seems even more pointed. And no, I don't count Kate Winslet or Renée Zellweger bulking up to, oh, 108 pounds for some part or other and getting hailed as a role model.

That's what's so artful about LaBute's opening—or, more accurately, prelude. The scene is a busy cafeteria and, before the beginning of the play proper, Ashlie Atkinson as Helen walks out onto Louisa Thompson's chilly set of steel and glass, with the audio hum of a crowd substituting for the real thing. She puts her tray down on a tall table and starts munching on a big slice of pizza. For several minutes, there's nothing to do but look at her—her face, her form, her size, all 250 pounds or so of her: the shape of things. If you saw a 250-pound woman on the subway or behind the counter at Barnes & Noble, you wouldn't give her a glance: they're part of the American landscape. The only place you don't see them is in our drama. And so, introduced to us as a kind of living stage effect, Miss Atkinson stands there and invites us to consider her. Sweet-faced and well upholstered, she's on the big side for an off-Broadway theater, but in a lot of Wal-Marts she'd be one of the svelter clientele. Nevertheless, it's a classic LaBute maneuver: You get the feeling that when the light bulb went off and he said, "Eureka! A play about a fat chick!," it was for this moment—not a character, not a plot, but a stage moment. It's supposed to be an unsettling stage moment, but, as usual with LaBute, it's so os-

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tentatiously presented as such that it doesn't really unsettle at all—it's an adroit gimmick.

And then the drama begins. Enter Tom (Jeremy Piven). He's some sort of businessman—neatly dressed (and not in the plus-size get-ups), blandly preppy, averagely charming. He's carrying his lunch and, glancing round the huge restaurant, muses aloud: "Pretty big." Helen hears this as a reference to her girth and takes umbrage.

Oh, come on. I'm all for meet-cute conventions, but that's the creakiest since Guy Bolton, P. G. Wodehouse, and Jerome Kern claimed their partnership began at the first night of *Very Good Eddie* in 1915, when Bolton muttered, "It looks like a good house," and someone misheard it as "It looks like Wodehouse," and brought Plum over to be introduced. In this case, jumping on Tom for calling her "pretty big" doesn't seem to fit Helen's character. I'm sure one can find large ladies who would react as such—one thinks of 1997 *Ms. Magazine* Woman of the Year Nomy Lamm, founder of a "fat activist" publication called *I'm So Fucking Beautiful* "because that's what I want to hear." But Helen is a librarian, and I find it hard to believe she'd take "pretty big" the wrong way or make an issue out of it. Fictional characters don't have to exist in our reality, but they have to exist in their reality, and LaBute's willingness to weaken it for the sake of a line or a laugh or a cheap thrill has stunted his development as a playwright. One of the reasons his luster has dimmed since *In the Company of Men* is that, even when the premise is novel, his reliance on the same bag of tricks diminishes it.

But Helen and Tom start talking, and they hit it off. She says she likes war movies. "That's not very girlie of you," says Tom.

She says, "You're probably dating the wrong kind of girls."

And there it is: the seed planted. Whether Tom's dating the wrong kind, he's certainly been dating the wrong girl, as we subsequently discover. In the intimacy of the Lucille Lortel, we can almost feel him start to look at her differently. She's direct and likable, and has a nimble wit because, when you're her size, your wit's the only thing that's going to be nimble. So, in the traditional manner of the jolly chubby sport, she preempts the fat-girl cracks by making them herself: "I don't just eat. I can be coaxed into doing other stuff, too." They exchange phone numbers and she leaves, and just as you're thinking that's all a little too slick and streamlined, Helen comes back and launches into a not exactly heartfelt but certainly less glib pitch, just in case he's not yet sold, he's not going to call. "Please don't let yourself be afraid of taking some kind of blind chance, or of what people think . . . Because this could be so great." Ashlie Atkinson is really an awfully good actress. As it's happening, you're gripped—by the character, by the disappointments she must have known, by how much greater her insight into him is than his insight into her. It's a marvelous speech as it's playing. Thinking about it afterwards, you're less sure: It seems more like standard LaBute shuffling of his modular furniture—he knows the set-up's contrived, so he redeems it by a contrived moment of honesty.

That's increasingly a problem with this playwright: you're too aware of what's going on under the hood. When I first found myself thinking this, I assumed it was because I was obliged to watch the thing as a critic. But even with the most famous Broadway play doctors—George Abbott or Neil Simon, say—even at their most mechanical, the scene usually has some life of its own rather than merely existing as a series of feints by its author. That's the drawback of LaBute's celebrity: like Stephen Sondheim or Lorenz Hart, he's become famous for his voice and his style and so increasingly he's what you hear, rather than the characters. Whatever it's nominally about—September 11th, fat girls—in the end it's about him.

Hence the play's principal structural defect: it's a boy-meets-girl story, but, even though the girl's a novelty, the boy's the same old Neil LaBute guy we've met a dozen times before. Tom is ambivalent,

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evasive, weak, conformist. And, given that what he's conforming to is the familiar cold cruel LaBute office environment, that pretty much hobbles the love story. I'm not saying everything should play out like romantic comedy, but always to preclude the possibility of true joyous love quickly becomes just as tired a cliché. Over a decade, his boy-meets-girl pattern has never varied: the girl could be a college co-ed, a sprightly gran'ma, a seven-foot transsexual, or a pet Chihuahua and the relationship would still be doomed, because in every case the boy is a Neil LaBute male character.

This time round, though Helen and Tom spend more and more time together and he delights in her company, it turns out that she identified the problem precisely in that first speech: "what people think." Even though he likes her, can he withstand the vicious "ribbing" of his friends? Or is he at heart ashamed of her and of the love that dare not speak its weight? That's plausible enough, and a not uncommon problem. But, in a 90-minute one-act four-man off-Broadway play, it's hard to convey the sense of being out of step with one's set when you've only got two actors left to represent your entire social world. And, in a 90-minute one-act Neil LaBute play, the friends aren't really friends at all, just a couple of creeps and sadists you hang with out of force of habit. In this instance, the two are Tom's office colleagues—the unpleasant Carter (Andrew McCarthy) and the hot but shrill Jeannie (Keri Russell)—and both seem too severe to stand for a whole social world. In the beach party scene, in minimal swimwear, Jeannie looks conventionally terrific, if you dig rib cages. But, if it weren't for off-Broadway economics, the scene could be a lot more effective: you're with five or six male buddies and their girls at the beach, and all the girls are thin and in bikinis—except yours. Pitting Helen against a shrieking harpie like Jeannie and a venomous sleazebag like Carter isn't the same: it's hard to see what Tom has to lose, and most of us would be reluctant to spend *any more time with these two non-stop* needling narcissistic moral bankrupts than the basic social interaction required by work. It was a particular strategic error to make Jeannie Tom's ex-girlfriend, because instead of representing any kinder or broader social attitude her resentment of Helen becomes purely personal. Even if Helen were a hundred pounds lighter, Jeannie would dismiss her as a fat cow—in the way that Gennifer Flowers, after being dumped by Bill Clinton, went on about what a big butt Hillary had. It's not a valid analysis.

What's fascinating is the way the audience seems to understand this better than the playwright. The scenes in which Tom endures the unpleasant attentions of his two colleagues drag, in part because Jo Bonney never finds a way to stage them as anything other than going-through-the-LaBute-motions but also because it's Helen that the playgoers are interested in. When the other guys are hurling invective, they want to get back to her, because for the first time LaBute's managed to create a character audiences respond to and root for. Presumably, it was an accident. But suddenly all the signature stuff—the clever-clever backchat in the office scenes—bores them: they want love to find a way. LaBute can't give them that, of course. He has a wonderful ear for the three or four lines of vernacular dialogue that, in deft casual strokes, sketch the contours of a relationship—the shape of things, again. But, even in a play with as ripe a subject as this, he can't, so to speak, flesh it out. Miss Atkinson and Jeremy Piven have a natural chemistry, and that in turn only underlines how artificial most of the "friendships" in the LaBute stock company are.

As the evening grinds on, Helen's buoyancy and confidence start to fade, as if she's suddenly realized she's in a LaBute play and her good humor can't possibly last. She offers, in an act of sacrifice to Tom, to have her stomach stapled. He thanks her for the offer, but he's unable to rise to it. "I want to be better, to do good and better things and to make a proper sort of decision here, but I . . . I can't," he says, and leaves it at that. And why wouldn't he? It's the all-

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purpose LaBute male character dialogue. The great theme of his work is that every man is an island, and true relationships are therefore impossible. The advantage of this philosophy is that it's a brilliant all-purpose excuse for the writer's inability to develop character. The disadvantage is that, even if it were true, it's become exhausted. In the LaBute oeuvre, there are foul men, and weak men carried along in their wake, and, whatever the superficial theme of each play, that too gets sucked into the stream of reductive pseudo-morality on which he made his name.

In the old days, a promising young chap like LaBute would have been taken in hand by some tough old bird of a producer who'd have explained to him that it's no good having an opportunistic eye for newsworthy pegs if you just hang the same old play on them. We don't have producers like that now, and it seems most likely that he'll go on writing the same play over and over again until he runs out of audience. In *The Shape of Things*, one of his characters raves about a feminist menstrual artist: "She is completely influential. Totally vanguard." LaBute seems less and less totally vanguard with each new work.

In the meantime, spare a thought for Ashlie Atkinson—a great premise, a great part, maybe the best she'll ever have in a business which prefers anorexics with breast implants. And in the end, like sad social occasions in high school, you leave feeling sorry for the fat girl. Whether or not it's true that inside every fat person there's a thin person trying to get out, inside this thin LaBute play there's the great American fat play still waiting to be written.

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Art

Gallery chronicle

by James Panero

Last May I wrote about the painter Milton Avery in this space. Avery excited me not only for what he could do on canvas but also for what his canvases could do to the world at large. *Red Rock Falls* (1947) unlocked a host of memories in me and provided inspiration to set fingers to keyboard.

This drive to create has led me to wonder if Avery's particular brand of modern art, rooted in color and flatness, can activate the world in ways that set such art apart from the rest of modernism. Avery's use of color often takes precedence over subject matter and "becomes" his painting's subject matter—dominating both representation and authorship while never subsuming them. An Avery painting is not about something. In the end it *is* something. Free of other associations, the closest connection between a painting like *Red Rock Falls* and the world is then not through a place on the map or an artist named Milton Avery, but rather through the engaged viewer. While he painted in a personal style, Avery could create something that became the viewer's own, a living object, long after the time and place of a painting's origin had slipped from recognition. Reception could become a new point of creation.

This month, in a spot of gallery serendipity, the special properties of a host of other colorist painters are now on view and worthy of similar investigation.

Considering the output of his students' work along with his own, perhaps no twentieth-century painter gave us more color than Hans Hofmann (1880–1966). Hofmann is now better remembered for his school and his famous students than for his own painting, but a small, well-executed show at Ameringer & Yohe seeks to right the imbalance.[1] At the heart of this exhibition, to which has been added more of Hofmann's work from the period, is a set of paintings that first appeared in his 1948 retrospective, "Search for the Real," at the Addison Gallery of American Art at Phillips Academy, Andover. In addition to a catalogue, Ameringer & Yohe has also made available a 1994 reprint of Hofmann's monograph essays from the time. Here he begins:

> Art is magic. So say the surrealists. But how is it magic? In its metaphysical development? Or does some final transformation culminate in a magic reality? In truth, the latter is impossible without the former. If creation is not magic, the outcome cannot be magic. To worship the product and ignore its developments leads to dilettantism and reaction. Art cannot result from sophisticated, frivolous, or superficial effects.

The avoidance of practicality never sounded so practical. In the mid- to late 1940s, however, with a nod to the surrealists, Hofmann failed to follow his own advice; he busied himself experimenting with automatic

1 "Hans Hofmann: Search for the Real" opened at Ameringer & Yohe Fine Art, New York, on January 6 and remains on view through February 5.

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drawing. The automatic elements on display at the current show—doo-dads, gew-gaws, and dipsy-doodles drawn as though with a felt-tipped pen—serve little more than a decorative role. At times these "sophisticated, frivolous, or superficial effects" bind up Hofmann's work and get in the way of his more fundamental interests in color, form, and the dynamics of "push-pull," which he never abandoned. *Pink Painting I* (1945), an abstraction with fussy graffito, anticipates little beyond the hour of its own creation. Meanwhile *Abstraction B* (1946), with only the last vestiges of automatic activity and featuring a bright palette, appears ten years ahead of its time. If there is a uniting factor in the output, it is Hofmann's knack for balance without resolution. Deliberately and at times by chance, the consummate teacher left his questions open for the next generation to answer—Hofmann understood the regenerative better than the generative properties of modern art. It took his students to take up where he left off.

One of Hofmann's best students, as Hofmann knew, was the painter Robert De Niro, Sr. (1922–1993). De Niro, who shares a name with his movie-acting son, is now enjoying a large exhibition at Salander-O'Reilly galleries timed to the release of a lavish monograph.[2] Peter Frank in his catalogue essay writes that "De Niro was closest in spirit to Bonnard and Hélion, the former an impressionist painter *après la lettre* and the other a former geometric abstractionist who returned to figural painting despite the approbrium of his non-objective colleagues." De Niro's indebtedness to Bonnard comes through clearest in one of his early paintings. *Venice at Night is a Negress in Love* from 1943–1944 features a Bonnard bather in radioactive meltdown, the palette more intense and atonal than anything Bonnard could have imagined.

One of the joys of the Salander monograph is reading De Niro's own thoughts on Bonnard reprinted from 1981: "the humble, modest, self-effacing painter of light, who had a discreet private life and a dedication to depicting the non-flamboyant, the quieter joys of life in France during the early part of this century." De Niro concluded that, "His works are not about happiness. They are happiness"—from one colorist to another, a not unexpected sentiment.

If Bonnard's compression of space and Hofmann's sense of composition informed early De Niro, his choice of palette took on a life of its own. Clement Greenberg made note of this in 1946: "Where De Niro usually goes wrong is in his hot, violent color, which, although he had digested the favorable influence of Matisse, often overasserts itself and distorts the drawing." By the mid-1960s and through the 1970s and 1980s, De Niro reached a signature style that was colorist and representational. He distinguished shape through wide, wavy brushstrokes of thick paint. Frank writes that De Niro "conflated the École de Paris (especially Fauve) palette with the gestural painting of his New York School peers." Action painting was in the air. Yet De Niro's success or failure hinged on how he interpreted his idea of gesture, and the results could vary painting by painting. In 1980 De Niro wrote against the idea of action painting, which he called "foreign to me, and, I believe, detrimental to painting, which is what Leonardo called it, 'a mental thing.'" But like the automatic drawing that invaded Hofmann's canvases a generation before, so gesture found its way into much of De Niro's work. These gestural indulgences brought the artist forward and pushed the viewer back, diminishing De Niro's potential for resonance. The large swizzles delimiting his *Figure Group* (1977–1982) speak to the nervous tic that affected more than one painter of the New York School. Compare this with a more successful, hands-off De Niro of similar composition, *Four Nudes* (1983). Subject matter, like the heavy hand of authorship, could also dis-

2 "Robert De Niro, Sr.: Paintings" opened at Salander-O'Reilly, New York, on January 12 and remains on view through February 5. A monograph of the artist has been published by Salander-O'Reilly.

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tract, and some of De Niro's religious scenes from the 1980s ring false in displacing the usual brac-à-brac of the colorist's world with iconography. The direct connection between a colorist's art and the viewer's eye has never been guaranteed—a fate that haunted De Niro's more than once.

It is a good time to be thinking about color, because New York will be awash in color this season. Exhibitions of George McNeil and Paul Resika, both Hofmann students, are upcoming at Salander. And at Tibor de Nagy, Jane Freilicher, another Hofmann painter, and one enjoying her own monograph, is on display.[3] Freilicher, born in 1924, began studying with Hofmann in 1947. Her circle included De Niro, Virginia Admiral (De Niro's ex-wife and another Hofmann favorite), Albert Kresch, Leland Bell, Nell Blaine, Paul Georges, Resika, Wolf Kahn, Richard Stankiewicz, and Robert Goodnough. Like many of her colleagues, including De Niro, Freilicher emerged from Hofmann's abstractionist instruction to become a representational painter. She also learned to walk a fine line between the gesture of Abstract Expressionism and the coldness of New Realism. Bonnard was an early influence, especially after an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1948. But if De Niro took the flatness of Bonnard and pressed it even flatter, Freilicher followed the lead of another Nabi, the more cerebral Edouard Vuillard, and stretched out her perspective depth. Paintings from her New York apartment and her Long Island home often employed Vuillard-like techniques of close objects set against distant landscapes—screens of flatness at wildly divergent distances. In *Casement Window* (1974), one of her most successful in this regard, the black squares of her windowframes form a background to a hanging plant while demarcating the city beyond. Amaryllis, poppies, peonies, and other plants and flowers pop up in front in many of her best scenes. Where these contrasts are missing, the picture plane becomes more transparent, the scenes more simply representational, and something is lost.

How appropriate then to return to Avery (1885–1965), a contemporary of Hofmann's but a painter very much of his own school. For the past few months Knoedler has put on a tight exhibition dedicated to Avery's seascapes—specifically to the violent sea, which of course recently has taken on a new dimension.[4] In the catalogue entry for this show, after a great deal of intellectual throat-clearing, Arthur C. Danto concludes with a statement that is right on: "The calm is not the sea's but his. His paintings transfer that calm to us." From *Lone Fisherman* (*ca.* 1941) to the near-abstract *Onrushing Wave* (1958), Avery's style could change around remarkably in each image, even as the effects produced by his sense of color and form remained constant. But if it is true that the outcome cannot be magic without a magic in creation, then Avery put something more than just color and form into each of these paintings. That final addition must remain inscrutable.

Museum note

The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia

"Economies of scale" can denominate modest-sized as well as gargantuan enterprises. That is to say, not all advantages accrue to the big ones. I thought of this recently when visiting the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia. This venerable institution bills itself alternately as "the oldest art school and museum

3 "Jane Freilicher: An Overview" opened at Tibor de Nagy, New York on January 13 and remains on view through February 12. A monograph on the artist has been published by Harry N. Abrams.

4 "Milton Avery: Onrushing Waves" was on view at Knoedler & Company, New York, from November 4, 2004 through January 29, 2005.

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of fine arts in the country" and "home to America's artists." (You almost expect a superscript ™ after those epithets, but it has not come to that, not yet.) The Pennsylvania Academy now occupies two buildings: a splendidly eccentric landmark structure by Frank Furness and George Hewitt (1876) and the "Samuel M. V. Hamilton Building," a large but nondescript office building next door. Both have been renovated for the Academy's 200th anniversary this year.

One of the first things to strike visitors to the Pennsylvania Academy—at least, one of the first things to strike those who start at the Frank Furness building—is how inviting the museum is. This is partly a function of size. The Academy is a small institution—like the Frick in New York, say, or the Gardner in Boston—and it has the advantage of intimacy. Then there is the architecture. One of the things we learn from this odd but seductive building—Michael Lewis, in *Frank Furness: Architecture and the Violent Mind* (2001), described it as "a thirteenth-century Gothic arch on a seventeenth-century mansarded pavilion"—is that the most fetching exercises in postmodernism are pre-modernist. (When the term "postmodern" first hit, some people complained—not unjustly—that it didn't make any sense: what, after all, was "postmodern" except "more modern"? So let's not put too much weight on the idea of a "pre-modernist postmodernism.) This is a building that not only makes a good first impression—that crazy, polychromed façade is irresistible—but also has a terrific follow through. As Lewis notes, Furness was a genius at animating a building, giving it a sense of flow, movement, circulation, kinetic "draw." In his effort to "overcome the inertness of stone architecture and make the building appear as a vital animate thing," Lewis writes, Furness employed "the whole repertoire of expressive Greek devices—column contraction, supple moldings, stylobate curvature, and, above all, entasis." The result is one of the most agreeably energized museum interiors I know.

The Pennsylvania Academy was founded at Independence Hall in 1805 by the artist Charles Willson Peale. It has two great claims to our attention. One is that it has never abandoned its life drawing classes, not even in the know-nothing, make-nothing decades of the 1960s and 1970s. (Several floors of the Hamilton building, the upper stories of which are still being renovated, will be given over to classrooms.) The other great asset of the Academy is its distinguished collection of American art, which has been handsomely rehung in a big exhibition called "In Full View: American Painting and Sculpture: 1720–2005," which is on view until April 10. Painting pre-1945 is in the Furness building; everything else is next door.

There are a few gems in the Academy's more recent holdings, but most of the real treasures are earlier works. In some cases, the interest is as much historical as aesthetic—I think of the large swath of wall space devoted to works by the Peale family, not just by Charles Willson but also by his brother and several of his seventeen children. But then there are splendid works by Gilbert Stuart, Thomas Eakins, William Glackens, Milton Avery, and Winslow Homer. The folk artist Edward Hicks (1780–1849), a Quaker minister, specialized in illustrating a verse from Isaiah ("The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb . . .") in more than sixty pictures with the title "The Peaceable Kingdom." The Academy has an excellent example. It also has a marvelous late picture by George Inness (1825–1894), "Woodland Scene" (1891), which is full of the gauzy ineffabilities that give his best work its seductive power.

There are unappealing notes in the Academy's anniversary rhetoric: a hankering after the trendy, the politically correct, the aesthetically nugatory. An exhibition of variously shaped, all-black surfaces by Quentin Morris, for example, manages to be both soporific and irritating. But the peeps of the academic avant-garde are a minor distraction in what is a powerful commemoration of some great American art exhibited in a masterpiece of American architecture.

—*Roger Kimball*

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Music

New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

Two thousand four was a Dvořák year, meaning . . . meaning what? The Czech composer died in 1904, meaning we were marking the centenary of his death, meaning we were playing him ad nauseam. You might say, "A composer on Dvořák's level doesn't need a 'year.'" But then, you wouldn't know the music world, which never misses a chance to overdo.

One of the last Dvořák concerts of the year took place on December 16 (Beethoven's birthday, as it happens—talk about a composer who doesn't need a "year," but he gets his, rest assured). The concert occurred in Zankel Hall, and brought us "Steven Isserlis and Friends." Who is Steven Isserlis? He is a British cellist, of thoughtful if not always stimulating disposition. And who are—or were—his Friends? Well, Joshua Bell, for one. He is the Indiana violinist who seems to grow in mastery every year (and he started out awfully good). Another Friend was Todd Phillips, the violinist who is best known for his membership in the Orion String Quartet. (His brother, Daniel, another violinist, also belongs.)

A third Friend was Paul Neubauer, the violist who is one of the best things about the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. Neubauer boasts one of the most pleasing string sounds in the business. An additional violist-Friend was Robert Rinehart, who plays with the New York Philharmonic. Finally, the evening had a pianist: Kirill Gerstein, a youngish Russian who has won a slew of awards and honors.

Their program was . . . well, Dvořák, and only Dvořák. Why taint it with an outsider? On offer were the Piano Quintet No. 1 in A Major, Op. 5; the Piano Quartet No. 2 in E-flat Major, Op. 87; and the beloved String Quintet in E-flat Major, Op. 97, dubbed the "American." It was never quite clear to me why the group was "Steven Isserlis and Friends," rather than, say, "Joshua Bell and Friends," or "Paul Neubauer and Friends"—but so it was. Perhaps the cellist selected his teammates, rather like the neighborhood kid who owns the ball, or something.

It is a truism about chamber music that regular groups—say, the Budapest String Quartet, or the Beaux Arts Trio—play better than "motley crews," musicians thrown together for a special chamber concert or two, especially star musicians. This is, indeed, a rule, but there are exceptions to it, and the Isserlis group proved one: These six, in whatever combination, played splendidly. And never were they more splendid than in that first work, the Piano Quintet No. 1 in A.

This work is seldom played, as illustrated by the amazing fact that, in December 2004, it was receiving its Carnegie Hall premiere. (Zankel, remember, is the smallish, newish hall in the Carnegie complex's basement.) Why this quintet should be so neglected, I have no idea; it is as fine as several of Dvořák's chamber works that are staples. The Piano Quintet No. 1 was writ-

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ten in 1872, when Dvořák was thirty-one, but revised when he was a more experienced forty-six.

I should say about Joshua Bell that it is somewhat startling to be reminded how good he is; so it was on this Dvořák night. He plays with extraordinary musical incisiveness—that is a word I keep returning to for him: incisiveness—and his technique is barely noticeable. That is, you don't have to worry about it, or even think about it. His tones are various, and apt, and he has a great sense of the structure and spirit of music. I dare say, he led this fivesome, whether intentionally or not. All the others performed well, too. The pianist, however, showed a tendency to bluntness, an over-percussiveness. Gerstein sits very close to the keyboard, and seems a bit stiff. Then again, Horowitz sat quite close to the keyboard (and with flat, "incorrect" fingers)—and he managed all right, technically.

Dvořák's first movement had a wonderful forward momentum, an insistence, an aliveness. The middle movement was scarcely less fine—and you should have heard Bell sing the melody. He did so modestly, but strikingly. His fellows were tasteful as well, with the pianist contributing some unblunt passages. Dvořák's quiet, rapt moments—among others—require precision and judgment, and these players did not fail. They happened not to end together, but you can't have everything.

The Finale—Allegro con brio—was fleet, on cat's feet. Bell's intensity and, again, incisiveness were astounding. Midway through, I thought, "This is about as dancing as music gets"—and it was touching to see Isserlis so enjoying himself, playing a lovable (and danceable) melody. I had thought him too contained a musician to reflect that kind of enjoyment; I was wrong.

Now and then, you hear a work that begins a program and think, "That's enough—that is a concert in itself. I am satisfied, full." This was true of Dvořák's Piano Quintet No. 1, played by Steven Isserlis and his friends. But there was (much) more Dvořák to go, beginning with the Piano Quartet No. 2 in E flat. The first movement—Allegro con fuoco—had high tension, and drama. In the flowing Lento, Isserlis's solos were adequate, if not distinctive. Gerstein did not quite match the lyricism and sensitivity of the others—and Bell did some flat playing. I mean, flat in intonation. No one's perfect (but don't tell Heifetz).

The third movement—Allegro moderato—is strangely beautiful, or beautifully strange. It is, indeed, one of the strangest things Dvořák ever penned. Isserlis & Co. brought all that out. And the closing movement—Allegro ma non troppo—is one of the most gladsome things Dvořák ever wrote. Our players brought that out, too. Gerstein's octaves could have been more coordinated and musical—but I have picked on him enough.

So, that was the Dvořák concert—no, there was the entire second half to go, which consisted of that "American" string quintet. At last, the one-composer evening took its toll; we were overstuffed with Dvořák. Not that the five did not play this New World-y composition ably. It's just that—certainly for my taste—the concert went a Dvořák chamber work too far.

It was a Janáček year too, you know—he was born in 1854, and if I failed to hear something from his oeuvre in 2004, it was not that the music world, in New York and beyond, didn't try. (Sort of a pity that the Czechs had to suffer such a big blowout in one year. Thank goodness Smetana's dates don't end in the number 4. Oh, hang on: They do! Smetana was born in 1824 and died in 1884. Still, 180 and 120 aren't anniversary-worthy.) The Janáček year was capped—certainly in New York—by the Metropolitan Opera's staging of *Káťa Kabanová*, an opera that the composer wrote in 1924 (uh-oh). *Káťa* is sort of a cousin of *Jenůfa*, which Janáček wrote in 1904 (I don't believe it). The Met staged *that* two seasons ago, with Karita Mattila, the fabulous Finn, in the title role. She was Káťa, too.

It may be time to recognize that Mattila is the most arresting "singing actress" we

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have. Her Jenůfa was electrifying, her Káťa was electrifying—and her Salome? Somewhere beyond electrifying. And I have left out (among other roles) Leonore (Beethoven), in which she is not so much electrifying as endearing and noble. Even ennobling, I would say. In *Káťa Kabanová*, Mattila demonstrated every vocal gift, and also a deep understanding of the character. Watching her, you almost fear for her—for the soprano—the way you should fear for the character (alone). She and the character are scarily one. Years from now, we may be talking about Mattila performances the way we talk about Callas performances—"You should have been there when . . ." An unfortunate thing about the Finn is that recordings don't quite capture what she offers in the opera house. And "quite" is too prissy a word: They don't capture it at all. "There is no substitute for live," is a cliché I often use, and it is especially applicable to Karita Mattila.

Her mezzo partner in the Met's *Káťa* was Magdalena Kožená,, the formidable Czech who portrayed Varvara. Kožená, is one of the better singers we have, of Czech music, certainly, but also (as it happens) of Bach. (See—or hear—a recording of arias on the Archiv label.) Kožená, and Mattila seemed to have something we must call "chemistry," for lack of a less tiresome word. They could turn out to be one of the memorable soprano-mezzo teams: I think of Callas and Stignani (so very, very different, but good together); then, later, Sutherland and Horne. Readers can no doubt come up with their own pairs.

Though it is February, can you stand a little Christmas, right this very minute? In December, I took in several Christmas concerts, and detected a pattern (one long in evidence): Christmas concerts can be some of the saddest and most deflating of the whole music season. They can be downright funereal. Why this should be so is a puzzlement.

One of the Christmas concerts I heard was by the Choir of King's College, Cambridge, in St. Ignatius Loyola Church (Park Avenue and Eighty-fourth Street). This is a very old, very storied English group, combining "choral scholars"—young men—and "choristers" (boys). They sang a varied and inviting program, starting with Poulenc's *Four Christmas Motets*, parts of which they handled exquisitely. They moved on to Britten's *Ceremony of Carols*, and then to a set of carols both traditional and new, and finally to Vaughan Williams's well-loved *Fantasia on Christmas Carols*. (Yes, this was a lot of caroling.) So, a more delightsome, more Christmasy program you could not have had.

I will now commit a national slur: The English have a remarkable talent for singing happy music unhappily. They have demonstrated this for generations. Of course, much to be prized is a degree of sobriety, or at least self-control. A kind of musical reticence is often better than exuberance. But the Choir of King's College is in different territory altogether. As they sang, I sometimes thought, "Don't they know it's Christmas?" Take "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen"—which has the word "merry" right in the title. (Incidentally, "God rest you merry, gentlemen" is one of the most mispunctuated phrases in our Anglophonic civilization.) Three years ago, before he turned eighty, I interviewed Ned Rorem, who, discussing changes in musical fashion, said, "It wasn't always the case, you know, that minor meant sad." I asked for an example. He said, "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen." But the scholars and choristers from Cambridge sang this carol quite sadly.

It was possible to leave this concert depressed—actually depressed. And you could have testimony from other attendees as well.

The gloom persisted at another church, St. Bartholomew's, at Park and Fiftieth. There, the Orchestra of St. Luke's, with the New York Baroque Soloists, performed Bach's Christmas Oratorio, under the direction of Mary Greer, a distinguished academic. This was part of a series called "Cantatas in Context," which incorporates Bach into the liturgical year—a smart idea. Anyway, these forces performed the

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Christmas Oratorio timidly, weakly, almost apologetically. I should un-commit my national slur, because, as far as I know, nobody up there was English. Singers sometimes sang as if afraid to harm their throats, or wake somebody, and instrumentalists were equally gingerly. The opening chorus of the oratorio, "Jauchzet, frohlocket," is one of the most joyous, most rousing pieces of music extant. It almost literally shouts good news. But from this group, it was a whimper. To play and sing with reserve and discretion is one thing; to retire from the field of performance—to negate the music—is an unacceptable other.

But there *was* good news on this day: The mezzo-soprano, Brenda Patterson, sang superbly, as well as anyone could in this music, be that person famous or (like Ms. Patterson) obscure. She showed solid technique, a beautiful—sort of juicy—voice, and, best of all, sure musical sense: sure Bach sense. Also impressive was the afternoon's bass, Christòpheren Nomura, who not only dispatched his arias intelligently and musically, but also made his recitatives more than just talking, or filler: Those, too, were musical.

Lest you think that all Christmas concerts were poor—except for some shining soloists—let me point out Chanticleer's evening, which it does annually at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in the Medieval Sculpture Hall, in front of the big Christmas tree and the Baroque Neapolitan crèche. This group—a dozen men from San Francisco—sang a typical program ranging from earliest musical times to (what we used to call) Negro spirituals. A woman, leaving the hall, said, "Now it can be Christmas." It certainly could. Chanticleer sings with as much reflection as anybody—but a spirit of joy ran through this concert, because it was, after all, Christmas: and these guys knew it.

At the New York Philharmonic, Kurt Masur, the former music director, returned for one subscription series and a special New Year's Eve concert: a performance of the Ninth Symphony. (You're supposed to assume it's by Beethoven.) Masur left New York in 2002, and has since been concentrating on the London Philharmonic and the Orchestre National de France, both of which he heads. His subscription concert in New York was all Russian, beginning with Rachmaninoff's *Isle of the Dead*. Masur has a bead on this work: He knows how it builds, and calls forth its hypnotic effect. In the second half of the program, he conducted Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, but not in a familiar orchestration (e.g., the Ravel): He did the one he favors, that by Sergei Gorchakov, made in 1954. It is gritty, sinewy, Russian (in that stereotypical sense of "Russian"). Masur—with an assist from Gorchakov—made *Pictures* alive in a way you rarely hear it. And the conductor proved that, at seventy-seven, he is at the peak of his powers, if you will pardon yet another cliché in this chronicle.

In the 1970s and 1980s, he was not—in my judgment—at the peak of his powers. I heard him many times with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, and he struck me as creditable, but far from great. In his seventh and eighth decades, however, he bloomed—again, this is my evaluation. That sometimes happens with a conductor, and it makes all the more infuriating, and incomprehensible, the insistence of so many critics on younger conductors. There is nothing too sexy about Kurt Masur (although I suppose that depends on taste): He is simply an excellent conductor, possessing a lifetime's wisdom, performing more compellingly than ever.

A word, too, about that Ninth Symphony. Before the Philharmonic played, the audience was informed that the performance was being "dedicated" to the victims of the tsunami, and that we were to think of them, along with our own good fortune. People are always doing this: "dedicating" performances of music, and freighting this or that work with a specific meaning, a meaning that may be foreign to it. This goes to the eternal question, What does music *mean* (if anything)? In my view, people ought to be

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free to think their own thoughts as music plays, or no thoughts at all. This is one of the glories, and mysteries, of music. Debussy said, "Music begins where human speech leaves off." Of course, the Ninth Symphony contains human speech—that Schiller ode. And the impulse of the New York Philharmonic was unimpeachable. But there is a certain dignity in allowing music to speak for itself, and allowing individual listeners to make of it what they will.

A final word about Kurt Masur: After he was through with the Ninth, he led the orchestra, chorus, soloists, and audience in "Auld Lang Syne"—it was New Year's Eve, remember. Telling about Kurt Masur was that he conducted this sweet little song with great musical and technical care. He is like that about music—all the best are. When Lorin Maazel conducts the national anthem at the beginning of a season, he does not merely toss it off, getting it out of the way; he treats it as important. (This is to say nothing of whether you like the way he conducts it—some don't.) As I noted in these pages when reviewing—over three consecutive Septembers—the massive CD collection called *Great Conductors of the 20th Century*, if you want to gauge a conductor's musical integrity, you may wish to do so in some small piece, even a trifle, like "Auld Lang Syne," or a Strauss polka. This could tell you more about a conductor than a Bruckner Eighth would.

Appearing at the Goethe-Institut—right across from the Met Museum—was the pianist Janice Weber. She performed under the auspices of Piano Expression, Ltd., whose aim is to showcase "New York-based pianists at affordable prices." (Tickets were $20.) Weber is Boston-based, as far as I know, but it was still good to hear her. She is a virtuosic pianist—very bright—who is known for playing forgotten music, often of a Romantic and technically hazardous nature. As her bio puts it, she travels down "uncommon avenues of the piano literature." Moreover, she's a novelist, the author of intriguing, clever, none-too-square tales. An all-around talent, Janice Weber.

At the Goethe-Institut, she began with the *Three Dance Portraits* of William Bolcom, written in 1986. Bolcom is the Ann Arbor, Michigan-based composer who is a king of eclecticism. Ragtime, cabaret, you name it—he contains multitudes. These "dance portraits" are pure Bolcom, sometimes reminding you of Prokofiev, sometimes taking you to Latin America. Of special interest is a piece called "Knock-Stück," which has the pianist knocking out rhythms with his fists. (Her fists, in our case.) I mean, on the piano's wood. We were always told that the piano is a percussion instrument, weren't we?

Weber next played the *Eight Preludes* of Frank Martin, composed in 1948. They are dedicated to Dinu Lipatti, and are mysterious, intricate, probing. We ought to hear them more. And do you know the story of Leo Ornstein? What a story. He died three years ago at 109, having been born in 1892. You can have all sorts of fun with the numbers: Ornstein was born five years before Brahms died; he died five years after the Smashing Pumpkins won a Grammy. He was an acclaimed pianist who withdrew from the stage while in his thirties; he would have a few years left, mainly to compose. Weber played his rhapsodic Fourth Sonata, written way back in 1918.

After intermission, Weber went down a common, and sublime, avenue, playing the pieces constituting Brahms's Op. 118. She did not wait for applause afterward, as if in recognition that this set is too holy to applaud. She concluded her recital with a transcription of Strauss's *Roses from the South* by Hubert Giesen. Do you recognize the name? He was Fritz Wunderlich's accompanist. And Giesen fashioned a romp of a transcription, harder than hell, just right for the talented Janice Weber.

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The media

Showing that you care

by James Bowman

One of the few pleasures to be derived from studying the media comes from watching the re-discovery by the hype industry and those who share its world-view of things known to the folk wisdom of mankind since time immemorial as if no one had ever thought of them before. They say that those who are really in love always think they are the first ever to feel that way, and maybe it is something like love—love of their own wisdom, or at least their cleverness—which produces the journalistic excitement of new discovery in each iteration of some timeless theme. The Boxing Day tsunami in southeast Asia gave rise to one new revelation after another, from the power of nature to the generosity—or lack of it, take your pick—of Americans to the victims of natural disasters. Perhaps the most curious of these stale epiphanies, however, was evident in the frequently made observation that God, having failed to intervene to save any of the 150,000 or so who died, must either not exist or, if He does exist, must not be God in the sense of not having the attributes traditionally associated with God. He could not be omnipotent, for example, if He were a loving god, and He could not be a loving god if he were omnipotent. One or the other sort of god, if not both, had to go.

Well, you'd think that nobody had ever died before, and that no one among the living had ever thought to reproach the deity with his or her cruelty in allowing death and suffering to happen. Smart-alec columnists by the score seemed to be taunting religious believers of all faiths—Where is your so-called God now, huh?—as if imagining that the latter had never before realized what awful things could happen to people, and that their belief must therefore be founded upon their ignorance. Even the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, ever eager to be conciliatory to the enemies of religious belief, was prevailed upon by *The Sunday Telegraph* of London to acknowledge the damage his own faith had sustained from the tsunami.

> Every single random, accidental death is something that should upset a faith bound up with comfort and ready answers. Faced with the paralysing magnitude of a disaster like this, we naturally feel more deeply outraged—and also more deeply helpless. . . . The question: "How can you believe in a God who permits suffering on this scale?" is therefore very much around at the moment, and it would be surprising if it weren't—indeed, it would be wrong if it weren't.

Here speaks the voice of Christian liberalism, always striving to see the world as God sees it, *sub specie aeternitatis*, because it secretly suspects that it could do a better job than God. But what, we may ask, has the "magnitude" or "scale" of the suffering God permits got to do with our belief in Him? If one person is left by a merely personal

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tragedy to ask, as Macduff does when Macbeth slaughters his wife and children, "Did heaven look on and would not take their part?" is that a less significant datum in calculating the likelihood of God's existence, power or love than if a million do? If so, it is hard to see why.

"Scale," that is, is a journalistic concept, and questions of theodicy arising from the sheer magnitude of misfortune are fundamentally journalistic phenomena. Scale and scale alone is the reason why 150,000 deaths on the other side of the world amount to a big news story and one death in the next parish but one does not. God, in the Archbishop's view, is expected to look at the world like a hack. In place of the clockmaker-god of the deists—the only one, by the way, to emerge from the media theomachy with any degree of credit intact—we now have the editor-god, albeit mostly as a negative presence. If there were a god, that is, he would think like a network news operation. It would be OK for him, like any other editorial arbiter, to ignore a death here or there if it's nobody famous, or nobody likely to be known to the viewers. But as soon as death becomes newsworthy, God had damned well better show up along with the network anchors and the producers and the camera crews and the satellite technicians and the boom mike operators, and he'd better be wearing his fabled "compassion" on his sempiternal sleeve.

For if Dan Rather cares—and by God you can see in those sad, compassionate eyes that Dan Rather *does* care—can God Himself care any less and still be God? To a certain kind of mind, the very idea is absurd. As a *bona fide* celebrity, Dan is more interesting than God anyway. He has feelings—and more feelings than just his compassionate ones. "It's very difficult, perhaps impossible, from the outside to understand the conflicting undertows that go through you as a journalist," he told *The New York Times*, using a particularly appropriate metaphor. "Flying out, I'm saying to myself, 'They're talking about death tolls that are practically impossible to imagine.' At the same time, you're saying to yourself, 'What a story.' There is no place else I'd want to be," he went on, his words tinged with just the faintest note of melancholy on account of his approaching retirement as the Olympian anchor of CBS News. "I literally say a prayer of thanks every day in order to have this work. A story like this is why you get in the business." Well, at least God listens to *him*, it seems. Maybe that's why it's sometimes difficult to tell them apart.

Well, that and the fact that Dan was Johnny-on-the-spot, as he has been at so many disasters before, while God was nowhere to be seen, except in providing us with Dan to show off his compassion in His place. Some defenders of God, it's true, thought that He knew a story as well as Dan Rather did. A certain Rodney Hacking, the vicar of Wainfleet St. Mary in Lincolnshire, spoke more forcefully even than his Archbishop for those inclined to be impressed by "scale" when he wrote in a letter to *The Times* of London that the disaster must eventually "come to occupy the place of greatest single event of spiritual significance since the Holocaust. The very idea of an interventionist God . . . has been seen most clearly for what it is: a children's fantasy. Santa Claus religion died on Boxing Day. We have to grow up and faith has to grow up." The Rev. Mr. Hacking's obvious contempt for his evangelical brethren and their "reports of God performing tricks in response to their prayers" was much greater than anything evinced by Martin Kettle in his thoughtful and measured disproof of God's existence in *The Guardian* that launched the whole debate. But Kettle, too, made a silly comparison to the Holocaust, albeit implicitly, when he wrote that "it is hard to think of any event in modern times that requires a more serious explanation from the forces of religion than this week's earthquake." That kind of thinking almost makes the Archbishop sound like, well, an Archbishop.

And, to be fair to the latter, he does not

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stop with his obeisance to "scale." It is understandably easy to focus on how much he is prepared to concede to the enemies of his faith, but he goes on to write:

> The extraordinary fact is that belief has survived such tests again and again—not because it comforts or explains but because believers cannot deny what has been shown or given to them. They have learned to see the world and life in the world as a freely given gift; they have learned to be open to a calling or invitation from outside their own resources, a calling to accept God's mercy for themselves and make it real for others; they have learned that there is some reality to which they can only relate in amazement and silence.

This is a way of denying, after all, that scale is the relevant consideration here. Or rather, it is so only in a negative way, since the scale on which we are asked to understand the actions of God is necessarily the micro rather than the macro one—which is why we only get muddled up and involved in absurdity when we try to look too far beyond our own experience. Moreover, Williams recognizes that religion is vulnerable to the taunts of the secular moralists precisely because religion itself has taught them the preciousness of individual life, something they are often prepared to forget when it comes to matters of abortion or euthanasia. "Sometimes," he writes, "a secular moralist may say in contemporary debates: 'Nature is wasteful of life; we can't hold to absolute views of the value of every human organism.' That is not an option for the believer. That is why for the believer the uniqueness of every sufferer in a disaster such as the present one is so especially harrowing. There are no 'spare' lives."

This is well said. And yet His Grace seems disinclined to share the credit for this high valuation of human life with the God who, so his faith avers, created it. The hard thing to explain is not why there are bad things in the world but why there is anything in the world, indeed why there is a world in the first place from which the exit of so many of us is a painful and untimely one. Evelyn Waugh's comic clergyman "Prendy" Prendergast in *Decline and Fall* lost his faith, we remember, because he couldn't understand why there was something rather than nothing. But nowadays it seems there is no challenge to faith save that based on the perfectionist standard that, where the creation might not suit us, it can only be as a result of the Creator's fault. "The ancient man," wrote C. S. Lewis in his essay, "God in the Dock," "approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock. He is quite a kindly judge; if God should have a reasonable defence for being the god who permits war, poverty and disease, he is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God's acquittal. But the important thing is that Man is on the Bench and God in the Dock."

Even where God is acquitted, it is hard to see how He can remain God. Another man of religion, the Eastern Orthodox theologian David B. Hart, wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* that

> [w]hen confronted by the sheer savage immensity of worldly suffering—when we see the entire littoral rim of the Indian Ocean strewn with tens of thousands of corpses, a third of them children's—no Christian is licensed to utter odious banalities about God's inscrutable counsels or blasphemous suggestions that all this mysteriously serves God's good ends. We are permitted only to hate death and waste and the imbecile forces of chance that shatter living souls, to believe that creation is in agony in its bonds, to see this world as divided between two kingdoms—knowing all the while that it is only charity that can sustain us against "fate," and that must do so until the end of days.

And yet what he says no Christian is licensed to do is just what any Christian must do, if he is not—as the skeptics unfortunately remind us—to be guilty of blas-

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phemy indeed. The wisdom in the old view that natural calamity was an expression of divine wrath, whatever its many shortcomings, was this: that it recognized judgment as God's prerogative, not ours. We cannot know the reason for such horrors, or even if there is any reason beyond what Hart calls "the imbecile forces of chance." But what we do know is that any God worthy of our devotion can hardly be the slave to those imbecile forces that we feel ourselves to be when such tragedies strike. And if not the slave, then the master. In that case even the most horrible things that we are called upon to endure must be in some sense His will—which His Son in Christian belief instructed His followers to pray might be done. There is even a degree of comfort in that reflection, though comfort is one of the things the Archbishop tells us we have no business seeking from our faith, along with ready answers.

Years ago, I attended a debate at the Cambridge Union in England on the proposition that "The concept of God has failed to provide a remedy for evil in the world." I remember that George Steiner was one of those proposing the motion and that the then Archbishop of Canterbury, the saintly Michael Ramsey, was opposing it. He was seconded by the Methodist and Socialist peer Lord Soper. Yet in the whole course of the evening all anyone talked about, barring a brief mention of "predatory capitalists" by Lord Soper, was not evil but suffering—which is not, as any competent theologian will tell you, the same thing at all. It *is* blasphemous to suggest that God might be responsible for evil, but the corollary is the distinctly unpalatable truth that suffering *per se* is not an evil, and must be in accordance with the will of God, precisely if indeed mysteriously to serve God's good ends. This is what no Christian that I saw quoted in the media dared to say. The chief rabbi of Israel is supposed to have said that the tsunami was "an expression of God's great ire with the world," and several Muslim religious leaders said similar things, but if there was any Christian with such robust views of the prerogatives of the Almighty, he or she was kept pretty well out of sight.

For most Christians have made their peace with the media culture to which religion is at best an exercise in sentimentalism. They are like the newspaper columnist I once quoted in this space and cannot resist quoting again who purported to disprove the existence of Hell because, if God was *even as nice a guy* as he himself was, He would never send anyone there. How hard it is for even those most committed to their Christian faith not to assume, like this scribbler, that if there is a god he must be, *ex hypothesi*, the ultimate Nice Guy. Yet even the most cursory reading of the Bible must show us that *that* God, at least, is anything but a nice guy. As Randolph Churchill said after reading the Bible all the way through to win a bet: "Isn't God a shit?" And so He would be, too, if He were what the theological sentimentalists both inside and outside the major religious denominations imagine Him to be. That's why none of them any longer put much emphasis on submission, obedience, or humility, the qualities that would once have been expected of believers in the face of tragedies such as the tsunami.

The media are by contrast full of romantics for whom God is, like earthly authorities, only there at all in order to be questioned and defied. Thus another columnist, William Safire, celebrated the Biblical character of Job in a book-length treatment as *The First Dissident*. Naturally, Safire too saw the tsunami as confirming his views of the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition. "The point of Job's gutsy defiance of God's injustice—right there in the Bible," he wrote in *The New York Times*, "is that it is not blasphemous to challenge the highest authority when it inflicts a moral wrong." Of course we could quibble and point out that He could hardly be "the highest authority" if He were indeed guilty of "injustice" or capable of inflicting "a moral wrong," but that would be to miss the point that

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authority itself is pointless to the journalist except as an excuse for rebellion. God is not really taken seriously either as Presence or as Absence. He is tolerated for the sake of a few liberal sentiments, as they have lately come to be seen, in favor of the poor or the meek or the peacemakers, and because He comforts the bereaved with the hope that death is not final, but He is expected to take a good deal of ribbing for being lazy and uncaring, and for His presumed attachment to outmoded ways of thinking about the world.

Rather like President Bush, in fact. So it was no coincidence that the second most remarked-upon absence from the world stage at the time of the tsunami was that of the President. Or, in Britain, of the Prime Minister. As John F. Harris and Robin Wright put it in *The Washington Post*, there were to be heard "complaints that the vacationing President Bush has been insensitive to a humanitarian catastrophe of epic proportions." And who were these complainers? For the most part, they were unnamed "skeptics" who "said the initial aid sums—as well as Bush's decision at first to remain cloistered on his Texas ranch for the Christmas holiday rather than speak in person about the tragedy—showed scant appreciation for the magnitude of suffering and for the rescue and rebuilding work facing such nations as Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, and Indonesia." Of named "skeptics" Harris and Wright cited only two, and those two were only mildly critical. The former ambassador and foreign policy *éminence grise*, Morton Abramowitz, thought the administration's response "does not seem to be very aggressive," while Leslie H. Gelb, the former *New York Times* reporter and president emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations, said that "when that many human beings die—at the hands of terrorists or nature—you've got to show that this matters to you, that you care."

Ah, yes! Showing that you care is what the celebrity culture expects of all those who occupy the public stage, and few indeed are the failures and shortcomings that have the power to disgrace our celebrity presidents and celebrity gods apart from the failure to show that they care enough. Feelings, in our time, are the guarantee of authenticity, and the warrant of authority, intellectual as much as moral or political. Thus her *New York Times* obituary told us of Susan Sontag who died, perhaps of a surfeit of compassion, the day after the tsunami, that "she laughed readily, and when she discussed something that engaged her passionately (and there were many things), her dark eyes often filled with tears." *The New Yorker* enlarged on this delightful capacity for emotion, revealing that "when she talked, her eyes would well up with tears, over such things as the Burmese government or Hilton Kramer or *The Brothers Karamazov*." Doubtless her fine feelings in the case of Hilton Kramer were like the tears shed in heaven over the fall of the brightest angel of them all, and they elevate the late Ms. Sontag to the empyrean occupied by our rich-feelinged TV news men and women and our game show and talk show hosts. Like Dan Rather, all of them must breathe a little prayer of thanks from time to time for the opportunity God has vouchsafed them to show God how it's done.

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Books

Wagner: moralist or monster?

by Roger Scruton

To succeed with a new biography of Wagner a writer must have access to unpublished sources, or a new vision of the composer's work, or literary abilities that match those of such accomplished predecessors as Ernest Newman, or at the very least a striking interpretation of the composer's character. In *Richard Wagner, Last of the Titans*,[1] Joachim Köhler sets out to impress the reader in all four of those respects, and even if he is at times too insistent on his *trouvailles* and *aperçus* there is no doubt that his book is a serious and much pondered study with which every Wagner enthusiast will want to come to terms. While staying within permissible bounds of speculation (something that he did not do in his recent study of Nietzsche), Köhler leans as far as he reasonably can towards a particular pattern of denigration, one which undeniably has much to be said for it, over and above its popular appeal in an anti-heroic age.

The Wagner presented by Köhler is a figure damaged from the earliest age by an unloving mother and usurping stepfather, but consoled during childhood and adolescence by the tender love of a favorite sister. Wagner idealized this sister as the good *anima* of his dreams, and wandered through adult life in the hope of meeting her. Her role was to redeem him, to assuage all guilt, suffering and rejection by sacrificing herself on the altar of his need—and all this not only as a sister but also as a lover and a bride. The actual women in Wagner's life were unable to carry out this demanding agenda, and even the heroines of the operas sometimes fall short, by asking some damn fool question, or by getting hitched against their will to some damn fool of a man.

It is hardly surprising, on this interpretation, that Wagner's love-life was so disastrous, beginning with his capture by Minna, by all accounts a self-centered tart with no understanding of her husband's genius, and ending with a second capture by the prudish Cosima who, according to Köhler at least, decided to air-brush her husband out of history and to replace him with a version more congenial to her self-esteem. In between those two formidable enemies Wagner managed to snatch quite a bit on the side from floozies and servant girls, but loved with all his heart only once—the mysterious Mathilde Wesendonck, whose attitude was probably "maybe"—Köhler being no more able to resolve the million-dollar question than any other of those who have attempted it. Did they or didn't they? The same question can be asked of Tristan and Isolde in Wagner's version of the story, and this reminds us of a remarkable fact—that the composer who expressed the height of erotic yearning and who built therefrom a comprehensive philosophy of the human condition, composed one of the greatest and strangest of all tributes to the ideal of chastity.

1 *Richard Wagner, Last of the Titans*, by Joachim Köhler; Yale University Press, 688 pages, $40.

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Incidentally, the book reproduces sketches and photographs of Wagner's women. Whether sempstress, temptress, or redemptress each appears as a singularly unattractive and self-centered frump. I suppose we should be grateful for this. Repeated exposure to ghastly females led the master first to imagine a better version and then to set her to music. Still, these gormless faces, staring from stilted daguerrotypes, reminded me of how very unlucky he was, and prompted a strong surge of commiseration.

Köhler's outline of Wagner's character is familiar, the composer having traced it again and again in his dramatic works, using the narrative trope of the wanderer in search of a redeeming love as a vehicle upon which to hang an unprecedented weight of mystical and philosophical thinking. But Köhler adds to the picture in interesting and contentious ways, and makes bold and often inspired attempts to present the masterworks in the light of the biography and the biography through the lens of the works. Here, in briefest summary, is the picture that emerges: Wagner was an emotional parasite, who demanded complete loyalty without returning it, who sponged ruthlessly off both friend and foe, who shamelessly exploited those who most generously loved him—from his cuddly servant girls to his half-crazed patron, King Ludwig II of Bavaria—and who was pinned down at last by the straitlaced and "bigoted" Cosima in a warm bath of luxury from which he nevertheless wished to slip out by the plughole. He quickly saved himself from his early social and political ideals, when in the aftermath of the failed Dresden uprising of 1849 he saw the cost of retaining them, and thereafter gave himself up to one all-consuming political passion, which was anti-Semitism. This was directed first towards Meyerbeer, to whom Wagner had every reason to be grateful and to whom, for that very reason, he wasn't, and then, with the notorious pamphlet on Jewishness in music, to the entire Hebrew race. Cosima encouraged this passion, since it was also hers, and in time anti-Semitism became a comprehensive *Weltanschauung*, which blended nicely with Cosima's naïve bigotries. Many people loved him, but all were rewarded in the end with some gesture of repudiation, when it was discovered that they too belonged to the ever-growing conspiracy by which he thought himself surrounded. The roll-call of victims extends from Mendelssohn, whose music taught Wagner so much, to Nietzsche, the philosopher who first penetrated to the moral center of the composer's art.

This depressing picture is backed up by some home-grown psychoanalysis, including striking interpretations of the dreams that Wagner recounted to the innocent Cosima (innocent in this respect at least) and which she wrote down in her diary. Köhler scrapes around as much as he can in the sub-soil of Wagner's early years in order to back up his psychopathology with a suitably alarming picture of step-father Geyer (whose name means hawk or vulture—*hol' dich der Geier* being the German idiom for "Devil take you!"). I was not convinced by this aspect of the book, and drew from the portrait of Wagner's early years a lesson quite the opposite of the one intended—namely, that bereaved families were able to rebuild a realm of love and support far better in those times, when the welfare state did not step in to relieve them of the duty to do so. Psychoanalysis of the dead is in any case an impossible enterprise. As Wittgenstein pointed out, the criterion of truth of a psychoanalytic interpretation is the patient's preparedness, under analysis, to accept it and (I would add) build on it. In the absence of a patient, Köhler's analysis of Wagner is as empty as Freud's of Leonardo (which also, come to think of it, relied upon a hidden "vulture," perceived in the folds of St. Anne's dress in the celebrated picture of the Virgin and child with St. Anne).

The main facts of Wagner's life are well enough known. What remains to add are the peccadilloes and petticoats (many ordered for himself by Wagner who, as Köhler

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delightedly points out, was a bit of a cross-dresser). Köhler is an artful writer, who is aware that most of his readers will not need reminding of the principal facts, and will therefore be looking at every point for some new interpretation, some surprising detail or maybe some believable overview of this extraordinary prodigy of a human being. He knows exactly when to curtail a story too much told and how to punctuate a familiar narrative with the detail that casts doubt on it, with the result that, however much you know about Wagner, you will probably stumble over some uncomfortable fact that causes you to think again about what it all means.

Still, the retort springs instantly to mind: so what? What is so bad about these vampires who suck our blood in order to remind us (what we are always in danger of forgetting) that our veins really do contain some? How lucky for Otto Wesendonck that his wife was loved by someone who immortalized not only her, but the name of Wesendonck, in music whose beauty will never until the end of time be surpassed. How lucky for Minna that, her second-rate promiscuous character notwithstanding, she has gone down in history as the abandoned wife of someone worth being abandoned by; how lucky for the mad King Ludwig that he ruined the public purse of Bavaria on behalf of someone who turned mortal money into immortal music. How unlucky for Germany that more of its petty monarchs did not follow suit, but instead chose to invest in the worst of all possible causes, namely the war on France which was to lead in due course to the temporary destruction of Europe and the permanent psychosis of Germany.

It is over this question, in fact, that I take most exception to Köhler's account. Köhler closely associates Wagner with the German nationalist movement, in which the building of Bayreuth and the works performed there played an undeniable role. He believes it is no accident that Hitler's love of Wagnerian symbols fuelled the Nazi frenzy or that the anti-Semitism so vehemently expressed in the composer's prose writings should later have re-emerged in Germany as a call to genocide. And because Köhler is a sophisticated writer, with a real grasp of the moral and philosophical issues that are dramatized and debated in the operas, his antagonistic reading of Wagner's personality percolates into his reading of the works. The Dutchman is Ahasuerus, the wandering Jew (and also Geyer, the allegedly hated stepfather); Alberich is the insidious money-grubbing Jew who pollutes the moral order from a place beneath it; Beckmesser is the Jewish interloper who undermines the honor and public spirit of the city. *Parsifal* is an affirmation of the divine light of Jesus—the light bestowed by mortal sacrifice—against the dark tyranny of the God of Israel. *Die Meistersinger* is not the innocent comedy proclaimed by its author, but a sinister avatar of German racism, so that Hans Sachs's interruption of the rejoicing at the opera's end to warn against the enemies of German art betrays, for Köhler, the real underlying tendency of the drama. And so on.

My response to this reading (which has been a commonplace of Wagner criticism since Adorno) is to ask: what if Wagner had never written his notorious pamphlet on Jewishness in music? What if he had never uttered an anti-Semitic remark but merely greeted all reference to the Jewish race with an enigmatic smile? Would we then be inclined to read anti-Semitism into the works that allegedly contain it? My response is: surely not. To someone who says "just look at Mime, the falsely humble, snivelling, wheedling, power-hungry schemer—isn't this the very caricature of the Jew?" I would reply simply: "who is the anti-Semite?" Moreover, if the Dutchman is really the Wandering Jew, what a vindication of the Jewish race, that Wagner should project onto it his own longing for redemption! If Veit Beckmesser is a Jew, what a great advertisement is *Die Meistersinger* for racial integration, that this vain little man should be so fully absorbed into the life of the city as to occupy the public office of Marker, that he should be accepted by everyone as a

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legitimate contender for the hand of Eva, and that he should be judged at last only by his musical and poetical performance and not by his race!

But of course Beckmesser is not a Jew, Wagner's spite against the half-Jewish Hanslick notwithstanding. Nor is the warning that Hans Sachs pronounces at the end of the work an invocation of *nationalist* sentiments. Wagner hesitated on artistic grounds to include this passage, succumbing perhaps to Cosima's pressure but also aware of the artistic need, at this juncture, to hold up the flow of jubilation and to remind the *real* interloper, Walther von Stolzing, that he cannot simply back away from the community whose old order he has challenged. Sachs's intention is to enfold Walther within a common loyalty and common moral and artistic inheritance. He therefore reminds the company of what has really been at stake throughout the opera, namely the equal need in both art and life for "tradition and the individual talent," to quote from another great artist who has been tarred with the anti-Semitic brush.

Anybody who thinks of *Die Meistersinger* as a celebration of German nationalism as we know it has surely lost the plot. The drama is an invocation of the self-governing city. It presents us not with the new Germany of the nation state but with the old and lovable Germany of the Burg, the Germany celebrated by Hegel as "bürgelischer Gesellschaft," in which autonomous corporations maintain order and meaning without depending on the state, in which local ties are sustained by religion, family, and the "little platoons" of civil society, and whose peace is symbolized in the serene F-major melody of the Nightwatchman, as he obstinately disregards the dissonant G-flat of his own policeman's horn.

True, this society needs to be renewed from time to time, and that is what the drama is all about—as are all comedies if we are to follow Christopher Booker in his brilliant summary of story-telling, *The Seven Basic Plots*. But it is not the state, still less the unified national state created by Bismarck, that Wagner summons to the aid of this community whose corporate feelings have staled. It is erotic love, shaped by the project of marriage, flowing through the channels of custom, and renewing family and civil society, along with the musical tradition that has the endorsement of these things as its true moral goal.

Wagner was in the business of creating legends, not dramas only. He therefore draws extensively on the archetypes of folk tales. As in so many "rags to riches" children's stories, his heroes tend to be orphans, or else to arrive, like Walther, from an inexplicable "elsewhere." They are on the surface antagonistic to the existing social order: but their antagonism is gradually overcome, often by some wise father-figure like Sachs or Gurnemanz, who is able to understand and forgive. Köhler is a modern German in this, that he prefers the revolutionary philosophy of Wagner's Dresden years to the later endorsement of the bourgeois order and the ethic of Christian renunciation. But that endorsement, made explicit in *Die Meistersinger* and *Parsifal*, is the true tendency of all the mature dramas, and is evinced in a final reconciliation between useful adventure and aged restraint. The outward form of this reconciliation is presented in the last act of *Die Meistersinger*, and its inner price is the theme of *Parsifal*. Those works can be read as tributes to the rediscovered father, and if stepfather Geyer lies at the back of this, then that only shows how much Wagner saw him as an object of love.

Köhler's desire to read the composer's life (as he sees it) into the dramas makes for some pungent and illuminating criticism. He is a perceptive synthesist, who recognizes the high seriousness of Wagner's intentions, and who draws fruitfully on Wagner's own accounts, in the letters to Röckel and Frau Wesendonck, to convey the grandeur of Wagner's artistic aims. He astutely points out that the philosophical ideas that underpin the late masterpieces come less from Schopenhauer than from Hegel and

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the Young Hegelians. Particularly important for the Wagnerian worldview is Hegel's great meditation, in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, on the master and slave—a passage which, Köhler tells us, the composer discussed with his fellow revolutionaries while manning a watchtower during the Dresden uprising, and which he was to translate from abstract concepts to concrete drama in his unforgettable portrait of Nibelheim. Köhler's impressive grasp of German romantic philosophy enables him to see Wagner in his true intellectual context, and to uncover the intellectual input that Wagner's own writings leave largely unacknowledged. Hence his book is a worthy study in the history of ideas that will be appreciated even by those who take exception to its denigrating portrait of the master.

As for this portrait, who can doubt that there is truth in it? Unfair though Köhler is to Cosima—whose *Diaries* testify to real intellectual and literary gifts—who can deny that she wanted to possess Wagner as an institution as much as to love him as a man? Harshly though Köhler judges Wagner in the matter, who can doubt that the composer's treatment of Ludwig II was manipulative in the extreme, and devoid of the compassion that the King so evidently needed? In these and many other ways Wagner scarcely earns our respect. But it is also true that Wagner suffered, both from his own bad behavior and from the incomprehension with which he was treated. In his creative work he devoted himself to the highest of ideals, with no special pleading on his own behalf and with a serene and objective vision of what is at stake in human life. Indeed, he was a great moralist, and the lessons expounded in his later works are as pertinent today as they were when he first announced them. He worked conscientiously on behalf of a vision that he wished urgently to share, and gave time and energy not merely to projects of his own but to the works that he admired, and to the public culture which for so long refused to admit him. He inspired love in both men and women, and was as likely to squander his borrowed money on others as on himself. All in all, and putting the supreme blessing of Wagner's works against the imaginative wrongdoing of his life, I would say: how lucky were those who paid his debts.

"Being a poet"

John Sutherland
Stephen Spender:
The Authorized Biography.
Oxford, 627 pages, $40

Stephen Spender
New Collected Poems,
edited by Michael Brett.
Faber & Faber, 393 pages, £30

reviewed by Paul Dean

There have been two previous biographical studies of Sir Stephen Spender (1909–1995). The first, by Hugh David (1992), was a hatchet job which caused the family great distress. The second, David Leeming's *Stephen Spender: A Life in Modernism* (1999), was more respectable, but it was still too frank about Spender's bisexuality for the comfort of some. This is odd, since Spender was open about the matter himself in his autobiography, *World Within World* (1951), and his autobiographical novel *The Temple*, first drafted in the early 1930s but published, in a revised version, only in 1988. It will be noticed that these accounts stop early in Spender's life, and it seems there was a feeling that the undeniable happiness of Spender's second marriage should not be overshadowed, in the public mind, by the admission that he continued to feel strong, even passionate, attachments to younger men.

John Sutherland, who knew Spender well during the latter's brief professorship at University College, London, has written, as his subtitle proclaims, not just "an" but *the* authorized biography. He has had access not only to the family papers but also to

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Spender's widow and his two surviving siblings. This gives his picture of Spender's childhood and youth, in particular, unrivaled interest and authority, even if his account of the later years is circumspect in places and needs supplementing by Leeming's book.

Nevertheless, Sutherland's "official" status also obliges him to maintain, and perhaps even to believe, that Spender is a significant poet. The belief cannot survive a reading of the *Collected Poems* in Michael Brett's new edition, which, for the first time, gives us Spender's entire output in unrevised form. Spender's own ruthlessly selective "collected" poems is about half the length of Brett's, and one has to grant him a degree of self-criticism, but what he left in was not much better than what he dropped. Sutherland's disdain for "the sterile hand of F. R. Leavis and his fanatically purist disciples" (I'd be interested to meet a half-hearted purist, by the way) is entirely misplaced. Spender's current standing in England, as a minor satellite of Auden, known through a few anthology pieces but largely of historical interest only, is perfectly fair. His criticism is that of a gentleman amateur, who can speak strongly of his own experiences and acquaintances and who has a broad, generous sympathy with European modernism—the modernism of Rilke (whom he translated) and Pasternak as well as of Eliot and Auden. His freedom from donnish pedantry is a blessing, but he had little gift for sustained thinking, whether in prose or poetry.

In 1976, when Spender was sixty-seven, he embarked on a relationship with a twenty-year-old student at the University of Florida in Gainesville. He wrote about this in some of his last poems, "Letter from an Ornithologist in Antarctica" and "Farewell to my Student," which contains these lines:

> Perhaps Bellini
> Delved from antiquity such an image
> Of a twenty-year-old Triton, against waves
> Blowing on a conch;
> And Seurat, centuries later, in the profile
> Of a hallooing boy against the Seine.
>
> But then you turned to me and said
> With that mild glance, a third thing to
> remember:
> "You are gone already, your thoughts are far
> from here
> At least three thousand miles away
> Where you will be tomorrow."
>
> Then ten years passed till, today, I write
> these lines.

One notices here that Spender offers two pictures, drawn from Bellini and Seurat, which most readers will identify, and then parallels them with a flat reminiscence. The external images are expected to animate a memory he can only report, not evoke or make moving for a third person. To be blunt, he is parasitic upon other men's creativity. The poem achieves at best a clumsy authenticity. In this it is representative of Spender's work when it is not simply bad. I realize that I am asking the reader to take a great deal on trust here, given that Brett's *Collected Poems* runs to nearly four hundred pages, but great swathes of the volume are barely readable. Spender's alternative to gawky plainness was a wildly undisciplined use of metaphor, often toppling over into the grotesque, the risible, or the meaningless. A frequently cited anecdote in *World Within World* documents a conversation with Eliot:

> At our first luncheon he asked me what I wanted to do. I said: "Be a poet." "I can quite understand you wanting to write poems, but I don't quite know what you mean by 'being a poet.'"

Sutherland's comment is, "Stephen knew what he meant." Precisely: that was just the trouble.

Spender's father, Harold, was another trouble, a figure he spent his whole life trying to exorcise. One of his best poems, "The Ambitious Son," was prompted by his

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father's death. It has a sureness of touch and a controlled fury very rare for him:

> Old man, with hair made of newspaper cutting
> And the megaphone voice,
> Dahlia in the public mind, strutting
> Like a canary before a clapping noise . . .
>
> Soon you lay in your grave like a crumpled clown
> Eaten by worms, by quicklime forgotten,
> Fake, untragic . . .

Harold Spender, a double First from Oxford, a moderately successful journalist, lecturer, and Liberal loyalist, married into money, was painfully conscious of being supported by his wife, and idolized his eldest son, Michael—a frigid prig incapable of humor, who despised his siblings. Harold wrote Stephen off as "flabby" and "unmanly." In turn, Stephen indicted Harold's "ignorant windbaggery . . . everything my father touched turned to rhetorical abstraction" (a fault from which his own poetry is not free). Harold Spender was a cultural philistine, propelling his children past Renoir nudes in the galleries with a cry of "Boiled lobsters, don't look!" He was appalled to find Stephen reading that dangerous radical, Bernard Shaw. It was left to Spender's maternal grandmother, who kept a beady eye on the accounts, to introduce him to Chekhov, Ibsen, and Strindberg, thus ensuring that his concept of modern literature would be European and not parochial.

At preparatory school Spender was bullied and miserable, comparing himself to St. Stephen the martyr. Only the music master was kind to him, and he retained a cultivated interest in music all his life. University College School, London, proved a more liberal and humane environment, but the boy was repressed and morbidly self-conscious: "I had learned that the whole of civilization was based on the concealment of physical acts," he wrote, and again: "My body seemed skewered on the gaze of everyone I passed in the streets." He began to contribute poems to the school magazine, and to read Freud and Joyce in reaction against his father's Victorianism.

In 1927 he went up to University College, Oxford (Shelley's old college—the comparison was duly made) to read History, but changed after two terms to Politics, Philosophy, and Economics. Here Spender rediscovered the unpleasantly arrogant and oafish types of his prep school days. The college was filled with hearty sportsmen, whose reaction to the reproductions of Klee and Gauguin in his rooms may be imagined. He fell in love with a fellow undergraduate only to be informed that he was a bore. Rescue came when he was introduced to W. H. Auden, then an undergraduate at Christ Church but already hailed as the best poet of his generation. Auden was cruel, telling Spender that he was valuable because he was "infinitely capable of being humiliated," and also, less reliably, that his great height had come about because "you want to escape from your balls." Nevertheless, to be accepted, even maliciously, by Auden, guaranteed that Spender became known as a poet, and a pamphlet of his work was published. He neglected his studies so much that he failed to obtain even a pass degree, an achievement which took something like genius in 1920s Oxford. He did not care: "I don't want to be efficient and have a trained mind any more than I want to be a motor-car."

The subsequent events—his sexual liberation in the twilight of Weimar Germany, his disastrous first marriage, his support for the Communists in the Spanish Civil War, his fire-fighting activities during the Blitz, his postwar work in Berlin for the Allied Control Commission, his role in UNESCO, his stream of lectureships at home and abroad—are all chronicled by Sutherland with, at times, excessive attention to detail. About half the book is taken up with the period up to 1940, a deliberate imbalance because Spender is so much a man of the 1930s. His later career was as a teacher of creative writing, a cultural influence

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through his editorship of *Horizon* and *Encounter* (which he long refused to believe was indirectly funded by the CIA), and, of course, as a reader of his own work.

He continued to write poems but felt increasingly ignored, and he never escaped the baleful influence of Auden, whose prodigious abilities could only be resisted by a profounder creativity than Spender possessed. Others in Auden's circle, such as Christopher Isherwood, found their own voice through prose. Spender's prose was at least workmanlike but he had no ear for cadence, no sense of the aesthetic organization of a sentence or paragraph. Besides, he was so set on "being a poet." He knew what he owed to Auden and managed to give it moving expression in a late poem, "Auden's Funeral," in which he remembers Chester Kallman putting on a record of "Siegfried's Funeral March" at the wake:

> Down-crashing drums and cymbals
> cataclysmic
> End-of-world brass exalt on drunken waves
> The poet's corpse borne on a bier beyond
> The foundering finalities, his world,
> To that Valhalla where the imaginings
> Of the dead makers are their lives.
> The dreamer sleeps forever with the dreamed.

The slightly fusty diction, the Miltonian inversion of "cymbals cataclysmic," and the Tennysonian lilt are oddly touching.

In the end, the irony is that Spender remained in some ways a Victorian like his rejected father. The scion of a high-minded Liberal family, with a tireless social conscience and a great capacity for friendship, he may well ultimately have valued human beings more than literature—in one sense, an entirely honorable position, but it enfeebled his writing. He found the variety of modernism represented by the "Movement" poets trivial, and (fortunately for him) literary theory passed him by completely. He looked to America to provide the true inheritors of the titans of his youth, admiring Roethke and Anne Sexton (whom he taught), less convinced by Lowell. But, never having acquired much intellectual discipline, he tended to react by intuition alone. He liked what he liked because *he* liked it: his approval was self-validating. This means that, if we are not drawn to him personally, we shall find it hard to share his enthusiasms or to respect his judgments. John Sutherland, who clearly does like him and cherishes his memory, never really asks himself how he might persuade the unconverted, while Michael Brett unintentionally presents much of the evidence for the opposition.

On the day of his death, Spender was working on a lecture he had agreed to give about Robert Graves. He was amazed, he told his wife, at Graves's gullibility, but perhaps this "was all an act." "These," Sutherland adds, "were his last recorded words." Spender had always had a nose for fakes, from his father onwards. He himself, although often, as he would admit, muddled and self-contradictory, emerges from Sutherland's book as an honest man trying to be true to his impressions and to live a dignified life. It is just a pity that the poetry remains, even after one has tried one's hardest to find merits in it, so largely dead on the page. Thanks to these two books, however, he has had what he once said he wished for: "I want a few poems to survive and some memoir of *myself* as distinct from any group."

De Kooning declined

Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan
De Kooning: An American Master.
Knopf, 752 pages, $35

reviewed by Karen Wilkin

It's not news that the New York Abstract Expressionists were an anxiety-ridden, hard-drinking group of cantankerous guys, passionate about art and (for the most part) brutal to women. The rhetoric attached to this generation reinforces these notions;

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the literature is rife with such terms as "breakthrough" and "arena for action," and a major study of the period is titled "The Triumph of American Painting." Yet research reveals that much of the lore of cold-water Tenth Street studios and argumentative artists' gatherings at the Cedar Bar and The Club is essentially true, even though the reality of this near-mythical era proves, not surprisingly, to be more interesting, more complicated, less glamorous, and also less squalid than legend holds. The most recent examination of these heady years is Mark Stevens's and Annalyn Swan's biography, *De Kooning: An American Master*, a thorough, well-written, and even-handed account that is at once an unvarnished portrait of an individual and an informative study of the New York art world that he helped to shape and that shaped him.

The literal and metaphorical foundation of Stevens's and Swan's study is their reconstruction of Willem de Kooning's little-known, wretched early years in Rotterdam, a period of familial neglect, violence, and grinding poverty. The authors conjure up the atmosphere of the port city as de Kooning might have known it as a boy—he was born in 1904—and piece together his dismal childhood. Art rescued him at twelve, when he was apprenticed to a leading firm of decorators at the suggestion of school teachers who noticed his ability to draw. The paternalistic directors of the firm noticed their young helper's gifts, too, and sent him to art school. Without Stevens and Swan making any undue claims, they suggest correspondences between the teenage de Kooning's mastery of Art Nouveau motifs and the whiplash drawing of his mature art, between his precocious skills, honed by traditional academic training, and his efforts to subvert his own facility—drawing with his eyes shut, for example—and between his Dutch origins and his avowed pleasure in the flat landscape and moist light of Long Island. The brutishness of de Kooning's childhood, his appalling family, his flight from Dutch propriety to the unconventional parts of the port city, and more are sharply depicted. This evocation of the painter's formative years reverberates through the rest of Stevens's and Swan's account, helping to explain (but not justify) the often less than admirable aspects of his behavior decades later: his doubt, his indecisiveness, his sense of being an outsider, his guardedness, his womanizing, his depression, his drinking.

The rest of the story is better known: how at twenty-two the restless young man stowed away on a freighter bound for America (abetted by a sympathetic Dutch friend) and jumped ship. How he supported himself as a commercial artist in Manhattan, how from the start he aspired to be a serious painter, and how, during the Depression, he connected with a polyglot community of ambitious young artists whose work, over the next decades, commanded international attention and made New York the center of adventurous, innovative abstraction—or something like that. The authors flesh out and add nuance to the tale. They describe in detail the milieu de Kooning tentatively entered in the late 1920s and fully inhabited by the 1930s and provide a wealth of information about whom he met and what he could have seen. By the 1930s, Stevens and Swan astutely note, "de Kooning knew how to be modern" and "knew how to be a painter," but "he did not know how to be a modern painter." What was required, they suggest, was for him to see "that an artist could invent himself, boldly and extravagantly, in the New World."

Role models appeared in the form of an unlikely trio of slightly older artists, all committed modernists, whom de Kooning called "the three smartest guys on the scene: Gorky, Stuart Davis, and John Graham. They knew I had my own eyes, but I wasn't always looking in the right direction." Davis was an all-American tough guy, equally devoted to his admiration of Cubism and jazz, who was forging a home-brewed, wholly original version of French vanguard painting. Graham and Gorky were, like de

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Kooning himself, immigrants—Gorky, a passionate, largely self-taught and -invented painter working to assimilate the innovations of the European vanguardists he most revered, and Graham, an immensely sophisticated painter, theorist, collector, advisor to collectors, showman, and sometime mystic, who was a source of the latest information about advanced European art. Gorky proved to be the decisive connection to new ideas about what painting could be. He and de Kooning became especially close, as their achingly sensitive, extraordinarily delicate figurative work of the 1930s attests. Both were immensely adept draftsmen torn between exploiting and subverting their abilities; both struggled to develop imagery that embodied their double allegiance to classical skills and modern formal notions.

The nascent, precarious New York art world of the years of the Depression and World War II, and the volatile postwar era that followed, are nicely illuminated by Stevens and Swan. Through interviews with friends, colleagues, lovers, and acquaintances—plus informative quotations gleaned from general relentless probing—the authors make you feel privy to private conversations and the debates at artists' gatherings, to be part of a world of hard work in the studio, haphazard meetings, friendships, resentments, and complicated relationships, such as de Kooning's life-long sense of equality and competition with Pollock. Yet given the obvious thoroughness of their research and the length of time expended on the project, there are some oddities. It's startling, for example, that Stevens and Swan seem to have not consulted Irving Sandler, a participant and a reliable witness to the postwar years, and to have chiefly relied for information about Clement Greenberg's relationship with de Kooning on a sloppy, error-riddled biography of the critic.

De Kooning's anxious process is made palpable. We seem to witness his difficulty in resolving paintings, a struggle that, paradoxically, became visible as a celebration of the transitory that is often part of the strength of a "signature" de Kooning: the sense that an image represents a momentary pause between previous states and future possibilities. We are made aware of his shifting notions of what a painting can be, of his changing aspirations, and of his evolving techniques. Sections of the book usually end with perceptive analyses of outstanding works chosen as emblematic of de Kooning's concerns at the time. Not surprisingly, given the context, these discussions are often weighted towards the psychological, yet cumulatively they provide a capsule aesthetic history of the painter's career. Again, not surprisingly—given de Kooning's famously oblique statements, his elusive personality, and his primary allegiance, above all other things, to making art—he comes alive more vividly as an individual through the biography's discussions of his work than in any other part of the book.

The authors chart the changing reception of de Kooning's work, from steadily rising admiration to international adulation—not only by critics, curators, and collectors, but by just about every aspiring painter in America, who wanted to paint like him—to apparent eclipse by a younger generation. They document his discomfort with success and his flaunting of it, his dedication to his work and his unease, his friendships with colleagues, and his domestic complications. They trace his living and working arrangements, culminating in the great factory-studio he designed and built on Long Island. After the 1950s, however, it's an increasingly discouraging story, punctuated by depression and a downward slide into binge drinking—"I'm not an alcoholic," de Kooning told Sandler, "I just drink too much"—and the tragic last years of dementia. (For those of us who believe that de Kooning's strongest work on canvas predates the '50s—the drawings are another matter—it's difficult to separate cause and effect.)

An image emerges of a notably self-absorbed man who wreaked havoc on the lives of people around him but still exacted devo-

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tion from them. The authors are elegantly dispassionate about all of this. They suggest Elaine de Kooning's famous toughness and self-involvement, while managing a grudging admiration for her. Ruth Kligman, notorious for surviving the car crash that killed Pollock and for subsequently having a very public liaison with de Kooning, is allowed to demonstrate her innate silliness in her own words. Stevens and Swan treat de Kooning's daughter and her mother with sympathy and delicacy. And they handle unsparingly the question of the distressingly empty paintings of de Kooning's last years and the motives of those responsible for his care at the time he made them. *De Kooning: An American Master* is a welcome addition to the growing shelf of biographies of twentieth-century American artists. The illustrations are disappointing, and it doesn't make you wish you had known de Kooning—but it enlarges your sense of the times in which he worked. That's a lot.

James & the Zeitgeist

David Lodge Author, Author.
Viking, 389 pages, $24.95

Colm Tóibín The Master.
Scribner, 352 pages, $25

reviewed by Carl Rollyson

In the acknowledgments to his nicely nuanced novel, David Lodge writes: "A few weeks after I delivered the completed *Author, Author* to my publishers in September 2003, I learned that Colm Tóibín had also written a novel about Henry James which would be published in the spring of 2004." The "also" refers to Emma Tennant's novel, *Felony*, subtitled *The Private History of The Aspern Papers*, which Lodge first became aware of in November 2002. So as not to be distracted or influenced by a work he gathered centered on James's relationship with Constance Fenimore Woolson, Lodge decided not to read *Felony* or reviews about it while working on his own novel. He concludes his acknowledgments with the tantalizing line, "I leave it to students of the Zeitgeist to ponder the significance of these coincidences."

I am no expert on the Zeitgeist. As a biographer, though, I look for sources. Although Lodge provides a bibliography and claims that his "biggest single debt is to Leon Edel," he also mentions, among a listing of other sources, that he "profited particularly" from Lyndall Gordon's *Private Life of Henry James: Two Women and His Art* (1998). A private life of Henry James? What could that mean? Surely that is a title more suited to a novel. Emma Tennant's subtitle is clearly meant to echo Gordon's, and Tennant forthrightly identifies Gordon's primacy in the acknowledgments to *Felony*.

Gordon, I believe, has a particular appeal for novelists because she writes about evidence that has disappeared. Her mission is to reveal what Henry James wanted buried: the precise meaning of his relationships with Minnie Temple, the inspiration for many of his finest fictional characters, and with Constance Fenimore Woolson, the grandniece of James Fenimore Cooper, an author herself. Woolson would later commit suicide—perhaps because James was not willing to share more of his life with her. Gordon follows Leon Edel's line that James felt he was to blame for Woolson's death: "The very urgency of his repeated denials of responsibility calls attention to their tie," Gordon concludes.

More importantly, however, Gordon writes like a novelist. Here is the first paragraph of her book, which introduces "A Biographic Mystery":

> In April 1894, a middle-aged gentleman [Henry James], bearing a load of dresses, was rowed to the deepest part of the Venetian lagoon. A strange scene followed: he began to drown the dresses, one by one. There were a good many, well-made, tasteful, and all dark, suggesting a lady of quiet habits and some reserve. The gondolier's pole would have been useful for pushing them under the still water.

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> But the dresses refused to drown. One by one they rose to the surface, their busts and sleeves swelling like black balloons. Purposefully, the gentleman pushed them under, but silent, reproachful, they rose before his eyes.

I can imagine Emma Tennant reading this passage and finding it irresistible. I then see her checking the biographer's substantial source notes and discovering that Henry James himself described this episode to Mercede Huntington of the Villa Mercede, once known as the Villa Castellani, Bellosguardo, Florence, where James and Woolson spent a happy period together (in separate accommodations), meeting (Edel and other biographers infer) for daily conversation.

Like a novelist, Gordon shows rather than tells. She comments very little on the drama of her opening scene, except to say that the drowning of the dresses suggests James's sense of culpability in Woolson's death. Even Gordon's source note for the episode is novel-like in that she makes no interpretative comment on James's need to tell what Mercede Huntington called his "strange tale."

The BBC first broadcast Huntington's account on June 4, 1956. A transcript was not published until 1987, and I do not know if Leon Edel was aware of this story. It is difficult to believe he could have ignored it, given his quasi-Freudian treatment of James's biography. Fred Kaplan retold the story in *Henry James: The Imagination of Genius* (1992), but he ruined its impact with the typical kind of interpolations that drive readers away from biographies and back to novels: "For some bizarre reason, he [James] thought that he could best get rid of them [the dresses] by drowning them." Not letting the story speak for itself, Kaplan adds: "He seemed engulfed by these dark simulacra, by the nightmarish representations of Fenimore [this is what James liked to call Woolson] that rose one after another, irrepressibly, making their claim of attachment, as if they belonged to him forever." I can see Gordon reading Kaplan, and remarking: "I can do more by saying less."

I wish to fasten on Gordon's treatment of Woolson and James because it so clearly helps to connect the constellation of recent novels that have centered on James. Like James, Woolson had the highest literary aspirations. She sought him out as "The Master," but she also tried to rival his work and even based several of her characters on him. Gordon's book came at a time when Woolson's work was earning greater respect from critics and biographers. Woolson is treated with great sensitivity in Kaplan's biography, where she appears as a much more formidable figure than the "old maid" Edel patronizes. Gordon advances beyond Kaplan by pointing out that Woolson's "innovative fables of artists precede those of Henry James." James also used her as a character in his fiction, but certain ideas for his stories seem to have originated with her—a possibility Edel considered but did not develop.

James and Woolson made a pact to destroy their correspondence, a fact that prompts Gordon to quote the James scholar Alfred Habegger: "Researchers are increasingly aware 'that interpretation has *already been built into* the documents allowed to survive.'" A biographer himself, James tried to control his biography through the selective destruction of evidence. Yet, as Gordon insists, some residue of an alternative story does remain. Certain letters eluded James's destruction, for example, and Woolson left a memorial to herself in letters discovered in the papers of her friends and associates.

But Gordon's interest in James is not one-dimensional:

> [H]e understood . . . that what is distinctive in women's lives is precisely what is hidden, not only from the glare of publicity, but from the daylight aspect which women present for their protection—or, it may be, for the protection of those who can't face what they are. James was irresistible to women because he met authenticity without fear, possessed himself of it, and put it out to play on the

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> stage of his imagination. His knowing, supremely intelligent, ageless, and—yes—irresistible, is what makes James increasingly pertinent.

To revisit James suddenly becomes—near the end of Gordon's first chapter—an exploration of the Zeitgeist. "The real James remained an American," Gordon affirms:

> A visionary moralist, he did not indulge in the European vogue for decadence. He was not a cynic. With him, virtue is seen to hold in a period when art-for-art's-sake debunks Victorian morality, and Modernism with its array of ineffectual men—Prufrock, Petroushka, Chaplin's little tramp—takes the stage. The vision of James has outlived the disillusion of the twentieth century; as the Moderns move farther into the past, he is with us, more than ever our contemporary. Only now do we approach the kinds of manhood and womanhood he proposed, not viable in his own age, but possible—essential—in ours.

James's women, Gordon insists, "were not submissive, not the helpless muse." With these women James formed bonds few men at the time could imagine. "We approach, here, ties more intimate than sex, closer than those of family and friends," a fusing of male and female that leads Gordon to her first chapter's provocative conclusion:

> Here is a starting point: to challenge the myth of the artist with the truer story of what we might call, for want of a better word, collaboration. To some extent, of course, James invented himself, but he could not have written as he did without partners—female partners, posthumous partners—on that unseen space in which life is transformed into art.

We turn to James, in other words, not to see where we have been, but where we are going.

Yet James himself did not wish to acknowledge the very "collaboration" Gordon seeks to reveal, which makes him the flawed and fascinating hero of the biographer's tale. It is this James who appears in Tennant's *Felony*, a thief who purloins the lives of others even as he writes his tale of *The Aspern Papers*, featuring a biographer who will stoop to stealing or do nearly anything, except (he belatedly realizes) marry Miss Tina, in order to secure the archive of his esteemed subject.

Leon Edel surmised that James had Woolson in mind while creating Tina. Tina, like Woolson, is related to an important literary figure. And Woolson's few extant letters to James suggest that he had inspired an intimacy between them that had perhaps encouraged her to think of them marrying. In Edel's biography and in Tennant's novel, James also has in mind the story of the bumptious Captain Silsbee, who attempted to seduce Claire Clairmont, Byron's lover and possessor of his and Shelley's letters. In *Felony*, *The Aspern Papers*'s "herbaceous prose" is a sham, one of James's disguises: "His tale rears up and lies flat again, a fold of paper masquerading as the real thing."

Something curious happens in these novels about James. His fiction becomes a kind of fraud, a failure to deal with the reality that Gordon seeks to expose. These novels—especially Tennant's—expose James's duplicity:

> Did he, even, do this purposely, at the time of presenting Miss Tina, the "young" Miss Bordereau (as Constance knows herself to be, and described as of 'minor antiquity' besides) with the infinitely cruel description of herself contained in *The Aspern Papers*? Is the man truly a publishing scoundrel, exposed by his own novella on the subject of greed for a poet's papers?

Like biographers, these novelists are reading James's novels back into his life, even as they read the novels in terms of the life that Gordon and other biographers have supplied. These novels seem to challenge the Modernist tenet that biography does not matter, that the work of art stands by itself. Gordon's reference to the Moderns and to

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art for art's sake in her first chapter resonates strongly in my biographer's mind as I read novels that imply art does appear differently—and James appears differently—when the biographical context is allowed to emerge.

This newfound respect for biography seems apparent in the remarkable crop of biographical novels that have appeared recently. In works as various as *I, Fatty*, *The Divine Sarah*, and *The Perfect American*, the lives of Fatty (Roscoe) Arbuckle, Sarah Bernhardt, and Walt Disney arise out of strenuous efforts by novelists to behave like biographers. These novels represent a break with Modernism—or so it seems to me—in their willingness to reveal their research. I was struck by this point while reading Joyce Carol Oates's novel *Blonde* about Marilyn Monroe, which seems, especially in its opening pages, to draw on my biography of the film star, and I was gratified to see Oates single out my work in her acknowledgments. This is a far cry from the truly old-fashioned Modernist work, for example, of Susan Sontag, a writer who did not deign to acknowledge her sources in *In America*, arguing that biography was merely fodder for the novel. I feel bound to say, though, that Sontag had reason to disparage biographies since she was accused of plagiarism.

In Colm Tóibín's novel, *The Master*, Edmund Gosse is offended when James steals a story of his for a tale published in the *English Illustrated Magazine*. Gosse objects to the "art of fiction as a cheap raid on the real and the true," and for a while refuses to provide the novelist with his "usual store of gossip." And here I thought biography was a "cheap raid on the real." The biographer, the butt of so many Modernist diatribes, has been replaced—at least in these novels about James—by the novelist.

Tóibín's novel seems like a distillation of the James biographies. No important incident in James's life seems absent, as Tóibín takes up James's ambiguous sexuality, the mysterious back injury that exempted him from fighting in the Civil War, and his failure in the theater. This is a masterly feat of compression less than half the size of the noteworthy biographies. But then fiction only demands from fact those details or incidents which contribute to the novelist's vision. Tóibín only has to be true to his Henry James, whereas the biographer not only has to compete with rival interpretations but also to reckon with recalcitrant history, which is richly informative in certain respects but rarely as revelatory as novels.

And yet, for all the novel's supremacy in certain respects over biography, I cannot see how Tóibín could have created this exquisite scene without Gordon's book at his side:

> One morning in Florence, when the maid had come, and he [James] had opened a letter from Katherine Loring about the health and welfare of his sister Alice, he began to discuss Alice with Constance.
>
> "Life has been difficult for her," he said. "Life itself seems to be the root of her malady."
>
> "I think it's difficult for all of us. The gap is so wide," Constance said.
>
> "You mean between her imagination and her confines?" Henry asked.
>
> "I mean between using our intelligence as women to the full and the social consequences of that," Constance said. "Alice has done what she had to do, and I admire her."
>
> "She really has done nothing except to stay in bed," Henry said.
>
> "That's precisely what I mean," Constance replied.
>
> "I do not understand," he said.
>
> "I mean that the consequences get into the marrow of your soul."
>
> She smiled at him softly as though she had uttered a pleasantry.
>
> "I'm sure she would agree with you," he said. "She is blessed in having Miss Loring."
>
> "She seems a ministering angel," Constance said.
>
> "Yes, we all need a Miss Loring," Henry said. As soon as he made the last remark, he

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> regretted it. The very sound of the name Miss Loring suggested a spinster skilled only in the art of caring for others. He had meant it as a joke, or a sign of gratitude, or a way of reducing the intensity of their exchange, but he knew, as it hung in the air, that it had come out as a flippant expression of his own need, as though that was what he required from Constance. He turned to her now, preparing a statement which would take the harm out of what he had just said, but he observed that she did not seem to have noticed it, or take it on board. He was sure, nonetheless, that she had heard him. She remained placid as she resumed the conversation.

Can it be any clearer what Gordon means by collaboration, or how necessary Constance Fenimore Woolson was to Henry James? In the years after her suicide, he visited her grave several times, and memories of her invaded his fiction. She pushed him to new insights, but the very act of challenging James's understanding had to be unnerving for both of them. And Woolson knew as much, carefully retreating behind a pleasant and placid façade, hiding herself as women, in Gordon's view, are wont to do.

What James could not bear was the exposure of his own need; what he could not countenance was anything that destroyed what Gordon calls "the romantic myth, perpetuated by James himself in the rarefied solitude of a writer in 'The Private Life.'" Genius cannot "emerge in a void," Gordon argues, although that is what James tried to create by drowning Woolson's clothes and destroying anything in her papers relating to him. As perhaps only a novelist can fully do, Tóibín has brought Woolson back from the void, although without Gordon's biography could he have done so?

Tóibín, Tennant, and Lodge all depict a James who hid from himself in his fiction. If biography offers only limited access to the inner life, these novelists seem to suggest that fiction has its own lacuna. A novel may seem complete in itself, yet biography demonstrates that novelists withhold as much as they vouchsafe. James focused on ideas for stories rather than on his life. In Tóibín's novel, he is the master of evasion, always finding the right word to end a conversation or simply taking refuge in silence.

In a curious way, Tóibín's novel is a vindication of biography, for even in *The Master* James is remote. In his most private hours—as portrayed in *The Master* at any rate—James is no more forthcoming with himself than he is with others. That we cannot know James any better in fiction establishes a kind of equilibrium between biographer and novelist. Tóibín's work suggests that James knew his characters better than he wished to know himself, just as a biographer, in certain respects, can know his subject better than the subject can know himself.

The White Queen?

Leonie Frieda Catherine de Medici: Renaissance Queen of France. Fourth Estate, 464 pages, $29.95

reviewed by Brooke Allen

Every country has its national myths, its defining narratives, its untouchable heroes and unspeakable villains. But most of the historical characters history enshrines or vilifies are far more complicated than their legends might suggest, and it is the task of revisionist historians to attempt to restore some balance and reality to their images. Thus Thomas Jefferson has been nudged from his high perch; thus many have tried—and generally failed—to salvage some of Richard III's ruined reputation.

Catherine de Medici, like Richard III, is one of history's caricatured villains. The so-called Black Queen, she was long supposed to have been not only a master intriguer but also an accomplished plotter and poisoner, the personification of all that the world found sinister in Renaissance Italy.

Reaction had to set in eventually. The

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first move to rehabilitate Catherine was made by the feminist movement to which, as a strong woman unafraid to exercise power, she naturally appealed. In her book *The Road from the Past: Traveling Through History in France*, Ina Caro amusingly contrasted two visits she made to the Chateau de Blois, first in 1974 and then in 1990. On the 1974 tour, Caro said, "the description of Catherine was the one traditionally given by historians. She was, as she had always been, the fat, unattractive, scheming, Sinister Queen of bourgeois descent. . . . Catherine's use of poison, massacre, and Machiavellian cunning paved her way to thirty years of power." Blois's tour guide took it more or less for granted that Catherine had murdered her brother-in-law, paving the way for her husband Henri II to become King. By 1990, Caro noticed, these allegations had been brushed aside, and the Blois tour earnestly celebrated Catherine's many accomplishments. The Black Queen, it seemed, was no more.

The real Catherine was far less evil than the traditional version would have it, but certainly more ruthless and bloodthirsty than current revisionists are ready to admit. She was, to put it briefly, a woman whom history placed in an almost impossible position, as Leonie Frieda demonstrates in her new biography, *Catherine de Medici: Renaissance Queen of France*. Orphaned at only a few weeks of age, Catherine spent her childhood as a marriage pawn bandied about by her powerful Medici kinsmen, Popes Leo X and Clement VII. At the age of fourteen she was brought to France and married to Henri d'Orléans, second son of King François I. François chose her as a means of forwarding his territorial ambitions in Italy: she was supposed to bring a dowry that included Pisa, Parma, Piacenza, Reggio, Modena, and Leghorn. But very soon after the marriage, Clement VII died with these promises unfulfilled and the rest of Catherine's dowry unpaid. She was now perceived as worthless: "J'ai reçu la fille toute nue," was François's comment, and her nationality rendered her especially disagreeable to the French, who, Frieda comments, when they "were not imitating the Italians in art and culture or occupying their country . . . , despised them as money-grubbing opportunists who would slip a knife between a man's shoulder blades as soon as his back was turned." Worse, Catherine was a rich girl rather than a royal one, and more than one courtier was heard to disparage this descendent of Lorenzo il Magnifico as a "shopkeeper's daughter."

Catherine kept her place at court by being a loyal wife to her taciturn husband, who became Dauphin upon the death of his brother in 1536, by producing ten children, and by currying favor with her all-powerful father-in-law. Though her rivalry with her husband's glamorous lover, Diane de Poitiers, would become legendary, she behaved with restraint in her dealings with the older woman. By the time her husband ascended the throne in 1547, she had earned respect if not love from his subjects. Henri II clearly trusted her judgment, for he left her in charge when he went to war.

Henri's accidental death while jousting left Catherine, now forty years old, in a dangerous position. Their eldest son, François II, was only fifteen and weak in both body and mind. The other children were small and, with the notable exception of Marguerite (who later, as the wife of Henri de Navarre, would become the infamous Reine Margot), sickly, tainted with tuberculosis and syphilis inherited from their grandfather, Lorenzo II de Medici. Henri II's wars with Spain had left the government deeply in debt and the peasantry overtaxed. The rising animosity between Catholics and Huguenots was about to explode in the long and singularly bloody French Wars of Religion. And Henri's overmighty subjects, especially the Châtillon family and the Guises, a cadet branch of the royal house of Lorraine, were ready whenever the opportunity might arise to wrest control of the kingdom from the feeble François and his inexperienced foreign mother. The Duc de Guise and his brother, the Cardinal de

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Guise, were in a particularly menacing position as the uncles of France's new Queen, Mary Queen of Scots, François's bride.

By nominally allying herself with the Guises, Catherine succeeded not only in being named regent for her son but also in ruling as such: quite an accomplishment at that time. It cannot be said, however, that she ruled well. In a vain effort to shore up fiscal ruin, she and her temporary allies the Guises reneged on the interest due on their loans, stopped pensions and salaries, and demobilized soldiers without pay. All of this contributed to the general discontent. As Frieda says, "there were two types of Huguenots, those who genuinely followed the new religion and others who were unwilling to be ruled by the 'illegal' regime of the Guises. The latter would be appeased if the Lorrainers and their stooges were replaced by a proper council with the Bourbon Princes of the Blood at its head."

These Princes of the Blood were Antoine de Bourbon (father of the future Henri IV) and his brother, Louis de Condé. The reason they were passed over was not only because, as next in line to the throne after Catherine's sons, they were politically threatening, but also because they were Protestants. Antoine de Bourbon, whom Frieda justifiably dismisses as "birdbrained," misplayed every card he was dealt in his life, and the cannier Catherine easily outmaneuvered him. When François II died in 1560, Catherine once again grabbed the regency—this time against stiffer competition—by masterfully manipulating not only the Bourbon princes but also the Estates-General. Her second son, aged ten, succeeded as King Charles IX. He, as weak and unhealthy as his defunct brother, would "reign" for fourteen years, but his mother remained the true monarch.

A Catholic herself, Catherine had little religious bigotry—very little, by the standards of her day. "In religious matters," Frieda comments, "she was no fanatic except when her sons and their birthright was concerned. The Catholic Mass suited her, a lifelong habit that she found comforting, almost as though it were another talisman to ward off evil."

There was nothing of the mystic in her makeup. Once when her unruly children burst into her room dressed as cardinals and bishops and riding on a donkey, she was heard to hoot with laughter. To her, tolerance was not only the sensible and natural line to take but the expedient one as well, as she tried to explain to the tireless zealot Philip of Spain: "For twenty or thirty years now we have tried . . . to tear out this infection [Protestantism] by the roots, and we have learned that violence only serves to increase and multiply it, since by the harsh penalties which have been constantly enforced in this kingdom, an infinite number of poor people have been confirmed in this belief . . . for it has been proved that this fortifies them."

She was correct. Although the chaos of the kingdom during her lifetime rendered her numberless efforts at religious conciliation pointless, Henri IV would later apply her policies successfully with his Edict of Nantes. Philip, in fact, would have done well to take her advice more seriously. His own game of hardball in the Spanish Netherlands, where he brooked no religious opposition whatever, ended disastrously. But while from our modern point of view her want of zeal seems healthy, it did not work to her advantage within the mental framework of the sixteenth century. "Her pragmatism and . . . lack of imagination fatally blinded her to the passion with which men and women clung to their spiritual beliefs," Frieda writes. She simply could not understand why people would go to war for religious reasons. She herself held nothing against the Huguenots, so long as they did not interfere with her sons' succession and the survival of the House of Valois. That, in fact, was her true religion. Her love and ambition for her children had more to do with their worldly glory than their happiness, and she did whatever she could to forward their interests, marrying a daughter to the King of Spain, maneuvering a son onto

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the Polish throne, and trying desperately to marry off her pockmarked, hunchbacked son, the duc d'Alençon, to Elizabeth of England. (Elizabeth, for political reasons of her own, pretended enthusiasm for the match, shamelessly caressing the dwarfish fellow in public and referring to him fondly as "my frog.")

In reality Catherine, in spite of a lifetime spent fighting for her children's birthright, was a spectacularly bad mother. Her court was splendid and extravagant (the greatest gifts she brought to her adopted country were cultural ones: the introduction of Florentine art, food, ballet, opera, and theater to France), but it was morally and sexually rotten. As Jeanne d'Albret, Queen of Navarre and mother of the future Henry IV, wrote to her son, Catherine was surrounded by "the most vicious and corrupt atmosphere imaginable." Catherine apparently believed that her sons were less dangerously employed debauching themselves than plotting against one another, but of course they did both, and the widow and children of Henri II just might qualify as the most dysfunctional great family in history—beating, by a nose, the family of Henry II of England.

Catherine's worst move, the blunder that finally destroyed what was left of her reputation, was her part in the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre. It need hardly be said that she never intended the killings to spiral out of control as they did: all she, and her favorite son, the Duc d'Anjou, had in mind was the judicious assassination of certain key Protestants, including their leader, the Admiral de Coligny. But they reckoned without the Parisians' violently anti-Protestant bias, the festering rage on both sides, and the summer heat that enflamed the Catholics and Protestants gathered for the ill-starred wedding of Margot to Henri de Navarre. By the time the killings ended there were 20,000 to 30,000 dead: a grisly portent of 1789. Catherine, the instigator of the hated massacre, was the loser by it. It more than undid all the efforts she had exerted for decades on behalf of the French monarchy and specifically the Valois dynasty.

Charles IX died in 1574 and was succeeded by his brother, the duc d'Anjou, who now became Henri III. Elected King of Poland shortly before Charles's death, Henri had ignominiously to flee Cracow at dead of night (taking Poland's crown jewels along with him) in order to get to Paris before his younger brother could grab the throne. The rest of his reign was carried out with a similar lack of dignity: Henri has gone down in history as "King of the Island of Hermaphrodites," France's only drag-queen monarch. He was more intelligent than his two elder brothers, but fatally unstable, and left much of the running of his government to his little clique of *mignons*.

Henri's unpopularity in Paris was a stark contrast to the city's idolization of the Duc de Guise (son of the old Duc of Henri II's time), champion of the ultra-Catholic party and a far more inspiring leader than the hermaphrodite king, or for that matter than any member of the Valois tribe since François I. With the country at war and Paris in open revolt, Henri arranged for the murder of Guise and his brother, the Cardinal, and for the secret disposal of their bodies in the great fireplace at Blois. Catherine, it should be noted, was not consulted: with the accession of the willful Henri, her life of power had finally come to an end. She lived long enough to tell him that he had made a fatal error, and died shortly afterward, in January 1589, at the age of nearly seventy. Only a few months later Henri himself met his end at the hands of a deranged monk. His younger brother, the duc d'Alençon (who had subsequently become the duc d'Anjou), had predeceased him.

It was Catherine's worst nightmare: the end of the decayed line of the Valois. There followed four-and-a-half years of civil war, during which Henri de Navarre, Henri III's heir, fought not only the ultra-Catholics and other French factions but also foreign forces aided by, among others, Philip II and the Pope. In 1593 he converted definitively to Catholicism (uttering his famous *bon mot*

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about Paris being well worth a Mass) and a few months later entered Paris peacefully as King Henri IV. The wars of religion were at an end.

The story is a highly dramatic one, and the character of Catherine is not only fascinating but also, more often than one might expect, engaging and sympathetic. Trapped by circumstance in a consummately difficult role, she acted with spirit and determination. But when Frieda tries to sell her as "a great prince and a great woman" she goes too far. "By fighting to preserve the throne (albeit for her sons) and the principle of legitimacy," Frieda claims, "Catherine de Medici—foreigner, consort and then beleaguered regent—had ensured the future of the French monarchy, at least until the revolution of 1789." This seems just plain preposterous. It appears, on the contrary, that Catherine endangered the monarchy and certainly the Valois line—first by introducing tuberculosis and syphilis into the family (though this was hardly her fault), then by bringing up her children with such a stupendous lack of discipline, decorum, and moral standards that they wasted all the respect their father and grandfather had garnered for the Crown. Her judgment was notoriously bad, and her love for excitement and intrigue harmed the nation again and again. ("This trouble," Henri de Navarre wrote to her during wartime, with his usual perspicacity, "pleases you and feeds you if you were at rest you would not know how to continue to live.")

Catherine's huge expenditures, crippling taxes, and general fiscal irresponsibility also helped create and perpetuate the conditions that would lead to revolution two centuries later. In the mid-1570s, after years of Catherine's rule, the country was in a shambles, wrote the Venetian ambassador of that time:

> Everywhere one sees ruin, the livestock for the most part destroyed . . . stretches of good land uncultivated and many peasants forced to leave their homes and to become vagabonds. Everything has risen to exorbitant prices . . . people are no longer loyal and courteous, either because poverty had broken their spirit and brutalized them, or because the factions and bloodshed have made them vicious and ferocious. . . . Demoralized, the people have lost their supreme reverence and obedience for the king, which was once so great that they would have given him not only their lives and their property but their souls and their honour . . . as for obedience to the royal orders and edicts they seem to make sport of them.

The person who really saved the monarchy was of course not Catherine but Henri IV, whose intelligence, bravery, clemency, and fiscal wisdom (he put the country's failing economy into the capable hands of the duc de Sully) brought the country back to peace and prosperity and restored dignity and authority to the Crown. His enduring reputation—he is still France's most popular sovereign—is fully deserved, and if any one person can be said to have postponed the revolution, he deserves the credit.

Leonie Frieda's portrait, then, is entertaining and often persuasive, but it is hardly the last word on Catherine de Medici, nor is it even a temporarily definitive biography: it is simply a first, and important, step in turning her back into a three-dimensional character rather than a simplistic national myth. Catherine was no villain. Neither was she much of a heroine. She was simply an imperfect, limited, bumbling human being trying to function in a role that would have taxed the greatest politicians and diplomats in history.

Shorter notices

P. W. Singer
Children at War.
Pantheon, 288 pages, $25

Saddam Hussein, alarmed by his swift defeat in the first Gulf War, formed the *Ashbal Saddam*. Saddam's "Lion Cubs" were his very own *Hitler Jugend*, boys ten to fifteen trained in weaponry, tactics, unthinking

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party loyalty, and cruelty. Doubtless many of them battle U.S. troops even today. This fact is little discussed by those who smirk at the assertion that Iraq's was an "evil" regime. In P. W. Singer's *Children at War*, a dispassionate study of child armies, the *Ashbal Saddam* is one among many state and non-state armies identified that disregard the rules of warfare—and of the most basic morality.

Singer informs us that "[t]he generally accepted estimate is that well over 300,000 children are currently fighting in wars or have recently been demobilized . . . just under 10 percent of combatants" in today's conflicts. Though child soldiers are usually associated with failed African states like Sierra Leone or Liberia, they are in use the world over. (The first U.S. serviceman killed in Afghanistan was shot by a fourteen-year-old sniper.)

Those who have fought them report children make the most vicious, fearless killers. Some practice cannibalism or are addicted to opiates. Of course, those responsible for turning children into monsters are adults—often adults accorded respect on the world stage as "freedom fighters." It should be more difficult to dwell in that delusion when one finds the activities of "resistance" may include kidnapping children, forcing them to execute their siblings, giving them hashish and heroin, torturing or raping them, and arming them with Kalashnikovs, RPGs, and other "man-portable" weapons.

Is it possible to win wars against those who do not abide by war's rules? If so, it will require an acknowledgment that arms do not make an army: if our enemies refuse to fight as we do, we must change the way we fight. Singer notes dryly, "Moral opprobrium is the only major risk to a group that uses child soldiers. However, any group that contemplates using children as fighters has already shown itself unwilling to be limited by prevailing moral codes." Dialogue, that code word for "moral opprobrium," has long been the only weapon in the UN arsenal. No wonder it falls on the U.S. to be The Consequences for enemies of peace and security—and with children in the crossfire *and* the crosshairs, no wonder it is such a thankless task.

—*Stefan Beck*

Masayo Duus
The Life of Isamu Noguchi: Journey without Borders, translated by Peter Duus. Princeton, 432 pages, $29.95

The life of Isamu Noguchi is a story of near-operatic proportions. His mother, Leonie, a Bryn Mawr girl, finds work as a translator in turn-of-the-century California. His father, Yonejiro ("Yone"), styles himself a Romantic poet of the European variety and books a third-class passage from Japan to stake an artistic claim in America. In 1904, as Yone is en route to Japan, Leonie gives birth to their illegitimate son—and a sculptor is born.

Isamu Noguchi's life as a mixed-race American is now the focus of Masayo Duus's new biography, and there are fascinating moments: Noguchi's voluntary internment during World War II, for example, and the fame his estranged father eventually found in Imperialist Japan.

But art is not Duus's strength, and much of the narrative here is flat; one hopes something is lost in translation. Through his unorthodox materials—wood, string, electric lights—and his penchant for kitsch—e.g., his "lunar landscapes"—Noguchi became a bridge between the high modernism of Brancusi and the late (post?) modernism of the postminimalists. He occupied an odd position in American art for reasons beyond his Japanese heritage. But for the great biography of Noguchi the artist, we will still have to wait. Noguchi's short autobiography of 1968, *A Sculptor's World*, for now remains the primary source for unlocking this sculptor's art.

—*James Panero*

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Notebook

The Metropolitan Duccio

by Marco Grassi

Imagine this: like most other civilized people, you have more than a superficial interest in the great music of the past. For decades you have been aware of a rumor circulating among music professionals that a manuscript score for an early Mozart quartet—an autograph by the teenage prodigy—was found soon after the last war in one of the Lobkowitz castles near Prague, having inexplicably eluded the scrutiny of the diligent Ritter von Köchel. It had then languished through the long Communist night in a safe of the Ministry of Culture. Only tantalizing bits and pieces of third-hand transcriptions had filtered out—a pale reflection of the delights that the work in its entirety might reveal. Suddenly, today's front page of the *Times* informs you that, after years of musicological research and endless legal squabbling, this 647th Mozart composition will receive its first full performance in over two centuries—by the Guarnieri—at Carnegie. *Quel frisson!*

The art-world equivalent of such a dream-event has just occurred, and the *frisson* it produces is no less memorable. One needs only to bear right at the top of the Metropolitan Museum's grand staircase and step into the first room: correct, the one where those peculiar Italian "primitives" often merit, at most, only fleeting glances. Here, drawn together by a tiny, miraculous newcomer, are the Metropolitan's other magical, early (fourteenth-century) Sienese paintings, surrounding it as if to pay homage to their illustrious predecessor. And well they should, for they are the "Duccesque" followers and the newcomer is their master, Duccio himself: a re-apparition every bit as momentous as a first performance of the mythical Mozart quartet. Created—"painted" is far too prosaic a word—in the closing years of the thirteenth century, the diminutive panel has firmly maintained its place in the slim catalogue of Duccio di Buoninsegna's works since it first surfaced in a Roman collection at the turn of the last century. But, unlike other celebrated paintings, this *Madonna and Child* had become, for well over fifty years, truly inaccessible—a potent but invisible presence. Not one of the four scholars who have published full-dress monographic studies on Duccio since 1951 had ever even seen the painting. They were obliged to list it as simply "whereabouts unknown," or more tantalizingly: "formerly, Brussels, Adolphe Stoclet Collection."

Adolphe Stoclet . . . it is a name that, to this day, resonates powerfully with anyone interested in the history of taste and collecting. The scion of a Belgian banking and industrial family, he had, as young man, the great fortune of meeting and marrying a niece of the painter Alfred Stevens. It was a match of which his family took a very dim view but that would change his life. Stoclet's bride had been reared in an environment uniquely rich in artistic accomplishment and open to the intellectual

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cross-currents of Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. The couple's early sojourns in Milan and Vienna served as preparation for a lifelong endeavor of artistic experimentation, discovery, and collecting. Returning to Brussels in 1901, they eventually commissioned the Viennese architect Josef Hoffmann to design a grand residence that epitomized, within and without, the purest of *Wiener Werkstätte* style. Completed in 1913, the villa's austerely elegant spaces slowly filled with a remarkable variety of exquisite artifacts, principally representing the "early" phases of many diverse cultures—China of the Shang and Chou Dynasties, Middle Kingdom Egypt, Sassanian Iran, Sumerian and Assyro-Babylonian Mesopotamia—and early Medieval Europe.

This marvelous trove of antiquity was not open to the casual visitor, but in the memory of those privileged few who experienced it in its original setting, the collection exuded a unity in taste and quality that belied the great diversity of its elements. It was continually enriched until both Stoclets died in old age, barely a week apart—a remarkable and touching partnership in life and art. There is little doubt that the couple, in their time, was considered rather exotic, if not downright eccentric, yet their perceptive eye and scholarly expertise is discernible in every piece that bears a Stoclet provenance, even long after the collection was dispersed.

In fact, there is no evidence to suggest that there had ever been an intention to maintain the life's work of these exceptional collectors as a self-perpetuating entity . . . not necessarily, in itself, a lamentable destiny. The Goncourts' beautifully reasoned (and reasonable) advocacy for *not* keeping collections intact after the demise of their creators is particularly apt for holdings as typologically diverse as those assembled by the Stoclets. Indeed, since their deaths and through three generations of their descendants, the collection has trickled through various channels of the art market into new and equally appreciative hands, both public and private.

But the Duccio had remained, all these years, the unseen and ever-elusive Holy Grail of the Stoclet collection. Thought at one time to have been originally the center of a portable triptych, the small gold-ground panel was first recorded in the collection of Count Gregory Stroganoff, a Russian grandee who had set himself up in a princely *palazzo* in Rome at the end of the nineteenth century. Stroganoff was a discerning collector of early and Renaissance Italian art and his considerable holdings comprised paintings, drawings, sculpture, and decorative arts. As the First World War approached, income from the Count's estates began to dwindle and, by 1910, a first sale was held in Rome. Several others followed until a final dispersal in 1925. The Stoclets may have purchased the Duccio from a Florentine dealer soon after the war, adding it to an already distinguished body of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Italian paintings—the school of Siena being a particular favorite.

About two years ago, as preparations were progressing in Siena for a major gathering of the works of Duccio and his school, there was persistent talk that the Stoclet *Madonna and Child* would, at last, make its first public appearance in nearly a century. The magnificent exhibition opened in October of 2003 (in the handsomely restored ancient hospital of Santa Maria della Scala) but, sadly, the precious panel missed its historic rendezvous. Only a few art-world professionals at this point suspected or knew the real reason for this absence: the Duccio was on its way to London to be offered for sale, privately, through Christie's. Despite this disappointment, the Siena exhibition was a glorious occasion to study, to savor, and to celebrate the art of the city's greatest painter.

Traveling to Siena from Florence on the "superstrada" is barely an hour's smooth ride through the luscious Tuscan landscape. And though both cities have been joined politically for over four centuries, the dif-

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ference in their character and language is palpable to this day. That is because until the dominion of Florence was forcibly imposed in 1555, Siena existed as a fiercely independent city-state with a flourishing commercial, industrial, intellectual, and artistic life. At no time was this urban flowering more intense and vibrant as in the second half of the thirteenth century. During this period, Florence was blossoming as well, and, as if in a miraculous equilibrium, each city produced artists of genius. None were to be more significant for the later course of Italian art than Giotto in Florence and Duccio in Siena. Each was able to transform and innovate, building on an older tradition. They succeeded in creating figurative languages that were radically different from the past and yet quite different from each other.

The Stoclet Duccio—we can now proudly call it "the Metropolitan Duccio"—is an astonishing accomplishment if considered only in terms of scale. Although tiny, it has none of the annoying "look-at-me-with-a-magnifier" precision of a miniature. From a photograph one could easily imagine a much larger picture. More importantly, the artist places the Virgin at a slight angle to the viewer, behind a fictive parapet. She gazes away from the Child into the distance while He playfully grasps at Her veil. One must realize that every aspect of this composition represents a departure from pre-existing convention. With these subtle changes, Duccio consciously developed an image of sublime tenderness and poignant humanity, almost a visual echo of the spiritual renewal that St. Francis of Assisi had wrought only a few decades earlier.

A careful examination of Duccio's two surviving versions on the theme of the Mother and Child that predate the Metropolitan's painting reveals the remarkable evolution of his art during the years of his early maturity. The Byzantine tradition is much more clearly reflected in those earlier works, as is the somewhat austere style of Duccio's predecessor, Cimabue. In 1308, perhaps a decade after the Metropolitan's *Madonna*, Duccio received the hugely important commission for the *Maestà* (altarpiece) that would adorn the Siena cathedral's high altar. Although this great undertaking produced one of the milestones of Western art, one can confidently state that Duccio had already achieved the high point of his stylistic development in the panel we can now admire at the Metropolitan; he simply went no further in terms of formal perfection and expressive intensity. Furthermore, we are doubly blessed by the fact that, apart from some quite minor abrasion in the gold background, the image has survived in a remarkably fine state—no small matter when judging a work of this size and significance.

If adding "strength to strength" is a judicious policy in building collections, then, with the addition of the Duccio, its rewards will be particularly bountiful for the Metropolitan. The museum's holdings, combined with those of the Lehman Collection, now afford an account of Sienese art of the Gothic and Early Renaissance periods unrivaled in the world but for the museums of Siena and Florence. To be sure, the art of Duccio can be admired elsewhere in America, even a few blocks down Fifth Avenue at the Frick Collection. Here and elsewhere (Washington, Philadelphia, and Fort Worth) precious bits and pieces of the *Maestà* have come to rest as a result of its tragic dismemberment in the eighteenth century. The Boston Musuem of Fine Arts is fortunate to possess a fine small triptych that may date from the end of the artist's life. But in all these examples, scholars have suspected the possible collaboration of the assistants that Duccio surely employed in his workshop once the great *Maestà* project got underway. Also, these paintings found their permanent homes here many decades ago—the "old days" of the art market. There are simply no others out there.

And so, the Metropolitan's recent arrival now rules supreme in this exalted company, and surely this could not have happened were it not for the outstanding quality of the museum's curatorial resources. Chief

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Curator Everett Fahy and Associate Curator Keith Christiansen of the Department of European Paintings, in addition to Laurence Kanter, Curator of the Lehman Collection, constitute, together, a particularly prestigious concentration of scholarly expertise in the field of earlier Italian painting. No other museum can boast of a more distinguished team. One suspects that they, more forcefully and convincingly than anyone, made the case for the Metropolitan's prodigious expenditure, and their advocacy merits our gratitude and applause.

But, of course, the expenditure *was* prodigious and this, inevitably, caught everyone's attention. It prompted the routine exercise of comparing the values of Southampton McMansions, star pitchers, or even Picassos to the object in question. Such considerations are, of course, meaningless, as are the pro-forma comments about the venality of our culture (as if venality had not existed in fourteenth-century Siena). More to the point would be a second, careful, visit to the Met, to that first room on the right wherein a temporary dialogue of Sienese voices is in progress. We have listened to and begun to comprehend the celestial strains of *kappelmeister* Duccio. Diagonally across, in a deservedly central position, is a slightly larger *Crucifixion* teeming with visual and emotional excitement. Also immensely rare and impeccably preserved, it is by Pietro Lorenzetti, a Sienese artist who understood his sources (Duccio, of course, and to a lesser extent, Giotto) and knew what to make of them. It tiptoed into the collection about two years ago with little fanfare (the expense was significant but not prodigious), and yet as a work of art it is almost as satisfying as its more famous neighbor. One can earnestly hope that the notoriety of the Duccio will draw more attention to the Lorenzetti; it will reward the viewer handsomely and be yet another dividend deriving from the Metropolitan's courageous investment.

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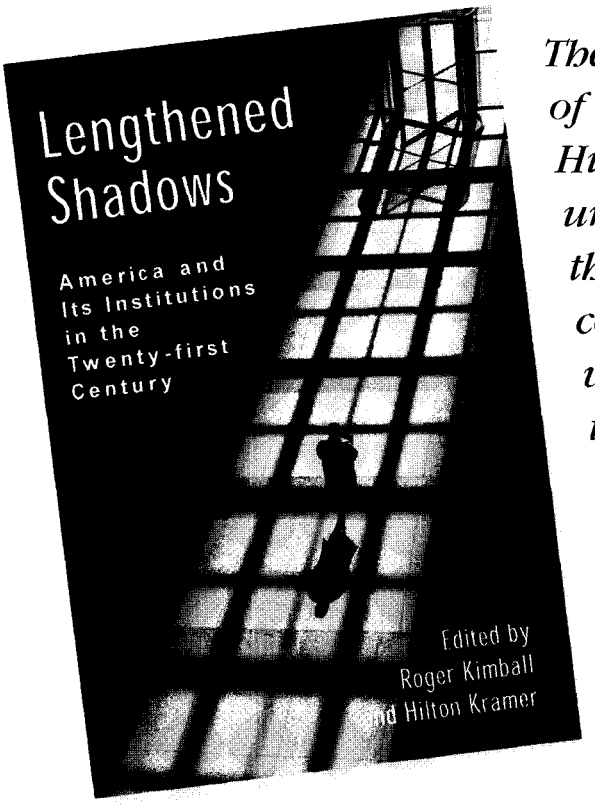
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America and Its Institutions in the Twenty-first Century
Edited by Roger Kimball and Hilton Kramer

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JEFF REESE

THE HOME COMING DREAM JEFF REESE 2004

Some persons, themselves inattentive, imagine, for instance, that Greek sculpture is abstract, that it has left out all the detail and character which they cannot find on the surface, as they might in modern work. In truth it contains those features, as it were, in solution and in the resultant which, when reduced to harmony, they would produce. It embodies a finished humanity which only varied exercises could have attained, for the body is the existent ground for all possible actions, in which as actions they exist only potentially, so a perfect body, such as a sculptor might conceive, which ought to be ready for all excellent activities, cannot present them all in act but only the readiness for them. The features that might express them severally must be absorbed and mastered, hidden like a sword in its scabbard, and reduced to a general dignity or grace. Though such immersed eloquence be at first overlooked and seldom explicitly acknowledged, homage is nevertheless rendered to it in the most unmistakable ways.

GEORGE SANTAYANA, REASON IN ART, X CRITERION OF TASTE; OR BY REPORTING THE ULTIMATE. FROM: THE LIFE OF REASON , 1905-06. CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS. NEW YORK.

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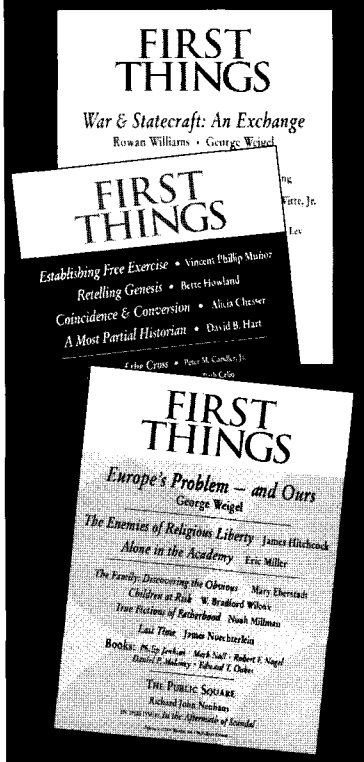
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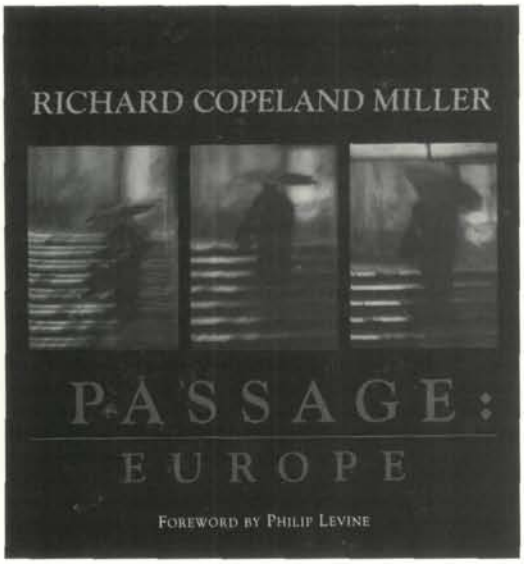

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